



Alice

Orlan Orphans, Book 12



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KIRSTEN
OSBOURNE

Alice

Orlan Orphans Book 12

Kirsten Osbourne

Unlimited Dreams

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Chapter 1

“Aunt Alice!”

Alice Sanders bent down to pick up her tiny nephew. She hugged him and twirled him around.

“Oh my! I think you’ve gotten even bigger since I saw you last week!” Alice laughed.

Her nephew beamed proudly. “Daddy says one day I’ll be as tall as he is.”

“I’m sure you will be,” Alice agreed. “Now, where is your mother? I want to say hello!”

Ruby Darcy made her way into the room, where she greeted her sister warmly.

Alice nearly gasped when she saw how pale Ruby’s lovely face was. “Are you all right?”

Ruby smiled. “That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. . . . Come on, let’s sit inside.”

Alice followed her older sister into the home where Ruby lived with her husband, Lewis, and their children. It was smaller than the home Alice lived in but beautifully furnished. Alice knew Ruby had selected many of the fabrics and pieces of furniture carefully and saved up money to purchase them through Lewis’s contacts at the mercantile. The Darcy family owned and operated the Nowhere mercantile on the first floor of the building they lived in.

Although Ruby was a young mother, she still helped out around the mercantile as much as she could because she enjoyed it. All of Alice’s sisters liked to stay busy, Alice included. In fact, their adoptive parents practically insisted upon it. They had all come to Nowhere together from a small town in New York a few years back. The church in charge of the orphanage took issue with the fact that young men and women weren’t supposed to live in the same residence. They arranged for the girls, fifteen in total, to move to Texas, and sent them on a bus with their matron, Cassie Hayes.

When they’d arrived in Texas, they’d found that there had been a terrible mistake, and there was no room for them anywhere. The women were going to be separated from the only family they’d ever known. Thankfully, Edna Petunia and Cletus Sanders had stepped in and saved the day. Although they were elderly, they were newlyweds

who had always dreamed of having a family of their own, and they were happy to open their home to the young women. Alice was so happy that she hadn't been separated from her sisters. Since she had been orphaned as an infant, they were the only family she had ever known.

Now that they had all settled in Nowhere, many of the older girls had married and started raising families of their very own. Alice was curious about what that might be like, but she assumed she'd remain living with her parents instead of marrying. She was much more serious and studious than the other young people she knew. The idea of promising herself to a man for the rest of her life was terrifying. She still didn't understand how Edna Petunia and Cletus managed to have such a full and loving relationship. Didn't they ever run out of things to talk about?

"I have something I need to tell you," Ruby said to Alice as her son ran out of the room to play. "I'm expecting again."

"Congratulations!" Alice exclaimed. It was no wonder that Ruby looked so pale and tired. Alice realized she should have recognized the signs earlier. "Are you feeling all right?"

"Honestly, I'm not feeling all that well," Ruby admitted. "I'm not as bad as I was when I needed Sarah Jane's help, but I feel . . . odd. I don't know how I'm going to get through the next several months."

"When are you due?" Alice asked.

"Dr. Harvey thinks the baby will come in about six months' time," Ruby explained. "I was wondering . . ." Ruby looked at Alice expectantly, like she was about to ask Alice for something.

"What do you need, Ruby?" Alice loved her family and took her responsibility to them very seriously. If her sisters or parents needed anything, she was always glad to offer assistance.

"I was wondering if you'd be able to help Lewis out in the mercantile. I work there almost every day to help out and also keep the place neat and tidy. Lewis told me not to worry about the mercantile, but I really think he could use the help. I wouldn't ask if I didn't think it was important," Ruby continued.

Alice smiled at her older sister. "Ruby, I'd be happy to help out around the mercantile. I would be glad to help your family because you and Lewis have already done so much for me."

Ever since Ruby had married Lewis, Lewis had been kind to all of her sisters. He treated them with respect and allowed them to order anything they wanted to be shipped to the mercantile.

"Really?" Tears brimmed in Ruby's eyes. "Thank you so much. I really appreciate it. I'm sorry I'm getting emotional!"

Alice walked over to her sister and gave her a hug. "Of course."

"Thank you, Alice. Who knows? Maybe one day, I'll be able to

repay the favor when you're expecting," Ruby suggested with a sly smile.

Alice shook her head. "Thank you for the offer, but I don't think I'll ever get married."

Ruby looked shocked. "Why not?"

Alice frowned. "None of the young men in this town take anything seriously. They like to joke and have fun and play pranks. There's no one I would ever want to settle down with."

Ruby laughed. "Oh, Alice. I hope one day you'll meet a man who can change your mind about that."

"With all due respect, I don't think I will." Alice straightened her skirt. She knew her sister wanted what was best for her, but Ruby couldn't possibly understand. Ruby had been lucky enough to meet and marry her soulmate. Alice didn't think she *had* a soulmate.

"In any, case, will you stay for dinner?" Ruby invited. "As a thank you for helping us out."

Alice shook her head. "No, thank you, but I appreciate the offer. I need to get home and finish my chores at the house. Since I'm going to be spending more time at the mercantile, I want to make sure I don't neglect any of my family responsibilities."

Ruby shook her head in amazement. "You're truly special, Alice. Do you know that? You're such a responsible and considerate young woman."

Alice waved her sister's compliment off. "I'm only doing my duty, Ruby, the same as anyone else." Alice stood up and gave her sister a hug.

Before she left, her nephew ran to Alice and threw himself around her knees. "Bye, Auntie Alice!"

"Bye, sweetheart. You be good for your mother, do you understand?" Alice kissed him on the top of his head.

"Thanks, Alice!" Ruby called.

Alice waved goodbye as she went down the stairs to return to the Sanders' house.



THE FOLLOWING DAY, Alice finished her chores early and set off for the mercantile. Though it was not quite seven o'clock, she found Lewis whistling as he stocked various cans and jars onto one of the shelves near the back.

"Good morning!" Alice called.

Lewis stopped what he was doing and walked to the front of the mercantile. "Good morning, Alice. Ruby told me you'd be coming to help out for a while."

"Yes, that's right. Where should I start?" Alice asked.

"Let me think." Lewis frowned and looked around the store.

Alice smiled. "I may not know all the details about running a mercantile, but I'm a hard worker and a fast learner. You can put me to work!"

"Thank you, Alice. I'll tell you what. I need to do some accounting this morning, so why don't you start out by sweeping the floors and dusting all the shelves? The mop, broom, and dustpan are in the closet. I'll think about what other tasks I need your help with and then tell you what they are after you finish cleaning. Does that sound okay?" Lewis asked.

"That sounds great," Alice replied. She found the closet Lewis was talking about and got out a broom and a dustpan. She started with the area around the closet and began working her way toward the front of the store, slowly and methodically. She swept all the dust and dirt into the pan and disposed of it outside.

As she swept up the last bits of debris, there was a knock at the door. Alice looked up, startled. The mercantile didn't open until eight o'clock, and it wasn't half past seven yet. She put her hand over her brow so she could get a better view.

Standing at the front door to the mercantile, staring inside and looking directly at her, was the most handsome gentleman Alice had ever seen.

He wore a dark suit and carried his hat in his hand. He also carried a brown leather briefcase. He looked at her with his deep, dark eyes, and Alice had the strange sensation that she knew him even though she had never met the man before. It was an odd but powerful feeling she had never in her life experienced.

Alice wondered if she should go tell Lewis that a strange man was at the door. Instead, she walked closer to the entrance and opened the door. "Can I help you?" Alice asked in a halting voice. Why was she so nervous?

"I'm Mark Brooks," the handsome stranger said. "May I come in?"

"I don't know about that. Please tell me your business, and I'll let Lewis know. He's the owner of the mercantile," Alice explained, still feeling a bit shaken by the man's appearance.

"I own a small merchant business, and I'm delivering our newest catalog. Is Lewis your...husband?" Mark asked Alice.

Alice blushed. "Oh, no. He's married to my sister Ruby. I'm Alice, and I'm just here helping out since she's expecting another child." Alice couldn't believe she had blurted all that out to a man she had just met. "I'm sorry. You didn't need to know all that."

Mark laughed. "It's okay. It makes it interesting. I have to admit, I'm a little relieved to hear he's not your husband."

Alice looked down at the ground. "Why would that be?"

"Because if he's not your husband, I doubt you'd have a husband. No respectable man would allow a woman as pretty as you to work in such close quarters with another man. Would I be right in guessing you're not married?" Mark looked at Alice with kind, questioning eyes.

Alice couldn't think straight. She couldn't believe how forward this man was acting with her, but she also found herself enjoying talking with him. "Yes, you're right. I'm not married."

"Hm." The man's eyes sparkled. "I hope that I'll be able to change that one day soon."

Alice frowned. She needed to politely excuse herself from the situation. She was getting flushed and didn't know how to handle Mr. Brooks's remarks. "I need to go get Mr. Darcy."

"Thank you, Alice." Mark smiled at her, and Alice thought she was overreacting. He was a salesman, and this was probably how he treated all the women he came into contact with.

Alice brushed off her skirt as she walked quickly toward the back of the mercantile. When she approached Lewis's desk, she cleared her throat to get his attention. "Excuse me, Lewis, but there's a man here to see you. His name is Mark Brooks, and he said he's a merchant."

"Thank you, Alice." Lewis stood up and nodded. "Merchants visit all the time, often wanting to sell me some of their latest products or share a new catalog. Mark Brooks . . . that name sounds familiar, but I don't quite know why. I'll go meet him."

Alice continued cleaning the shop as Lewis went to talk to Mark. She was close enough to hear their conversation.

"Good to meet you. I'm Mark Brooks. My uncle was Frank Brooks." Mark shook Lewis's hand heartily.

"Nice to meet you, Mark. Yes, I know your uncle. I haven't seen him in quite some time. At least a year or more," Lewis said, putting his hands in his pockets.

Mark looked down at the ground. "I'm afraid that he passed away after a lengthy illness."

"My condolences," Lewis told him. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Thank you," Mark replied. "I've inherited his business, and I'm going around to each of his previous customers to see if there are any outstanding orders—or new orders you'd like to place."

"That's a fine idea. I'm sure you'll learn the ropes of the business in no time at all with a head like that on your shoulders," Lewis said, seemingly impressed by Mark's actions. Alice knew that Lewis didn't give out compliments lightly. A person had to earn them.

Mark chuckled. "I'm not so sure about that. My uncle did teach me a lot during the summers I spent working for him, but I wish we'd had

more time together. There's a lot to learn. I only hope that I'll do as good of a job as he did in keeping his customers satisfied."

Lewis put his hand on Mark's shoulder. "Your uncle was a very good man. You have big shoes to fill, but I'm sure with a little patience and hard work, you'll do well."

"Thank you, Mr. Darcy. I appreciate that. While I'm here, I wanted to see if you would be interested in looking at our newest catalog." Mark pulled it out of his briefcase. Alice finished dusting and moved to the back of the store, where she couldn't hear what they were saying. She watched as Mark animatedly spoke to Lewis, and Lewis nodded and gave a few short responses.

She had to admit, Mark Brooks was an incredibly handsome man. She had rarely seen someone who looked as good as him in the town of Nowhere. Most of the young men she knew were ranchers she had known for years. They were often raucous and loud, with dirt covering their faces and clothing. Mark was completely different. He wore a finely tailored suit and classy shoes, and he carried a fancy briefcase. Still, she knew she needed to be careful about men like that. Her father, Cletus, had warned her about men who traveled for a living. He always said it took time to get to know a person enough that you could trust him.

Alice watched as Mark and Lewis shook hands, and Lewis returned to his desk in the back of the mercantile. Mark walked toward the door, then hesitated. He turned back toward Alice. "Do you work here every day of the week?"

Alice felt her cheeks turning red again. She busied herself with her broom and dustpan. "I'm only helping out while Lewis's wife is expecting. But yes, I work here every day except for the weekends."

Mark held his hat to his chest, as he had when he had first introduced himself. "Well, that's lucky for me. Lewis asked me to stop by tomorrow so we can finish discussing his needs for a big order he'd like to place. I'm glad to hear that you'll be here waiting when I get back."

Alice couldn't help herself from making a face at Mark's comment. "I won't be waiting for you. I'll be doing my work, just as I do every day."

Mark looked surprised but quickly smiled. "Of course. You're right. I didn't mean to be so bold."

"It's all right. I really should get back to my work now." Alice suddenly felt shy around the man.

Mark tipped his hat as he placed it on his head. "It was a true pleasure to meet you, Alice."

"Nice to meet you as well," Alice replied softly as he walked out the door. She watched his broad shoulders and slender, strong frame

disappear into the distance. For the rest of the day, no matter how hard she tried to focus on her responsibilities at the mercantile, her thoughts kept drifting back to Mark Brooks, the handsome traveling merchant.

Chapter 2

The following morning, when Alice arrived, Mark and Lewis were sitting at a table in the middle of the mercantile, talking and laughing. She was surprised at how close they had gotten in only a day's time.

Alice noticed that Lewis's coffee mug was empty. "Would you like more coffee?"

"Just a little more, Alice. Thank you," Lewis answered.

Alice turned to Mark. "Would you like some as well, Mr. Brooks?"

Mark grinned at Alice, revealing a dazzling white smile. "I'd love that. Thank you, Alice."

Alice felt her cheeks redden as she rushed toward the back of the mercantile to make some coffee for the men. She didn't understand the effect the traveling salesman had on her. He made her feel silly and special, all at the same time. Silly because she didn't care for young women who only paid attention to the way men treated them. Special because she genuinely felt like Mark was interested in her as a person. Alice sighed. It was all so confusing. She wished Ruby were there. She'd surely know what to do.

Alice made coffee and brought two steaming mugs to the men. She set them down in front of Lewis and Mark. Mark flashed her a special smile as she walked away, and Alice felt a tingle inside of her stomach that she had never experienced before. She tried to ignore it and hoped it would go away. She wondered if she was getting sick, but she had a feeling that the tingle had something to do with Mark Brooks. She didn't like it.

Alice threw herself into her chores that morning, scrubbing the mercantile like she had never scrubbed before. Each time a customer came in, Alice would pause her cleaning and assist them with whatever they needed, since Mark and Lewis were still talking. Before noon, the floor was sparkling, the shelves were in meticulous order, and each piece of furniture and item had been dusted or polished.

Alice looked at the clock. It wasn't time for lunch, and she had done all of the work she had intended to do for the entire day. She knew Lewis would have a few more chores for her, but she didn't want to interrupt him. He and Mark were talking quickly and laughing

a lot. She couldn't bring herself to disrupt their meeting.

Alice decided to review the ledger. Lewis had said in the past that if she was interested in learning more about how the mercantile operated, he would be willing to teach her. In school, Alice had enjoyed numbers and figures and was excited to learn more about how Lewis ran his business. Alice busied herself in learning all about all the transactions that Lewis had written, along with every last detail, in the mercantile's ledger.

Before she even realized any time had passed, out of the corner of her eye, Alice saw Mark stand up. He and Lewis shook hands, and Mark began to put his papers in his briefcase. Lewis walked over to Alice. "I see you're studying the ledgers. I was wondering if you were still interested in that."

Alice smiled. "Yes, it's so interesting. I'm learning a lot just by reading the numbers, but I'm sure you'll be able to explain it to me and give me the full picture later."

"I'd be happy to. As my business grows, it becomes more and more important to review the numbers regularly and make sure nothing is amiss. Sometimes I ask Ruby to check my work, but she hates arithmetic," Lewis explained.

Alice grinned. She remembered how Ruby would complain about math when she was still in school. Not only had Alice always had a talent for numbers, but she also liked the subject—it made logical sense. Unlike certain subjects, like literature or history. She'd take math over those topics any day, but she knew her sister didn't share her view. "Thank you, Lewis. I appreciate it. Also, I got done with all of the chores you asked me to do today. What should I do next?"

Lewis looked around the mercantile admiringly. "Wow, this place looks great. Let me think about it while I'm on my lunch break and then this afternoon, I'll give you a new list. Does that sound okay?"

"Of course. Thank you," Alice replied. Lewis was a kind and considerate boss. She had known that he was a good man, but she had never thought about what kind of boss he would be. She was appreciative that he treated her well and had reasonable expectations.

Lewis smiled at Alice and disappeared into the staircase that led up to his home. Lately, he had been visiting Ruby and the children and taking his lunch at home to make sure she was feeling all right. Dr. Harvey said she was healthy, but the baby growing inside of her demanded a lot of rest. Ruby, like all of the Sanders girls, hated not being busy, but she knew it was important to ensure the baby was born healthy.

Alice started to approach the front entrance so she could lock the door before she began to eat her sack lunch, but she realized that Mark was still there, and he was in her way. "Oh, I didn't realize you

were still here.”

Mark flashed Alice one of his big white grins. “I stayed because I wanted to ask you something.”

Alice found herself unable to say anything in response. She looked to the back of the room. Lewis had left. Anything Mark wanted to know, Lewis was probably the right person to answer.

“This isn’t a question for Lewis,” Mark said gently, as if he could read Alice’s mind.

Alice frowned. She found her words. “Then what is it?”

Mark looked down at Alice. “Lewis just placed a very large order with my company. This makes it much easier for me to learn all about the business my uncle left me without feeling pressured to sell many small orders. It also means I’ll be coming back here in two weeks’ time to make the first shipment. When I come back, I’d like to take you to supper with me. Would you go out with me, Alice?”

Alice bit her lip. She truly didn’t know what to say. She wished one of her sisters were there to tell her what to do. She stood there for a long time, wishing Mark would take back his question. Dinner with him sounded lovely, but she didn’t even know him! It was all happening too quickly.

Mark frowned. “You look like I’ve just given you terrible news, not asked you to supper. Have I done something wrong?”

Alice shook her head. “Not wrong, exactly. I don’t quite know what to say. I’m afraid I don’t know you very well, and I don’t feel comfortable with the idea of us going on a date together.”

Mark nodded. “I see. I can’t say I like your answer, but I can respect it. I hope you have a nice day, Alice.”

Alice felt relieved as Mark turned to walk away. “You, too,” she called after him.

Before he reached the entrance, Mark spun around again. “I’ll be back at least twice a month to make deliveries and talk to Lewis. I’m not going to give up on my plan.”

“Your plan?” Alice was confused.

Mark held the door open and stepped out into the sunlight. “I intend to marry you one day, Alice Sanders. And I’m not easily deterred.” The door clanked shut, and Alice was left all alone in the store. Her heart and her mind were both racing. What had just happened?

Alice looked at the clock. It was already a quarter past noon. She wouldn’t have time to visit one of her sisters and make it back to the store by one o’clock, when she and Lewis re-opened the mercantile after lunch. She longed to tell one of them every single word Mark had spoken and how he’d made her feel. But for the time being, she was going to have to get to work.

When Lewis got back from his lunch break, he saw Alice reading a book, the ledger folded up neatly beside her. “Did you get tired of all the ledger numbers?”

“No, I finished reading it while you were at lunch,” Alice told Lewis.

Lewis looked surprised as he stared at the thick ledger. “You read every single page?”

“Yes, it only went back a little over a year. I’m assuming you have several more ledgers from years past.” Alice pointed to the back of the mercantile where Lewis’s desk was.

Lewis nodded. “That’s right.”

Alice pulled out a folded piece of paper from the book she was reading. On it, she had written a series of figures and symbols. She handed it to Lewis. “I also noticed that it seems like you’ve been overpaying for flour.”

Lewis frowned as he reviewed Alice’s calculations. “Thank you for doing all of this. I’ll review this and see if I need to make an adjustment.”

“You’re welcome. It was easy for me to look at because you keep your books in good order,” Alice responded. “I appreciate when things are organized and well-kept.”

“I’m glad you found them to be in order. I can’t stand it when things get disorganized,” Lewis agreed. “I’m surprised that you picked this up so quickly.”

Alice looked down. “It was nothing. I’m sure I still have a lot to learn. I’m done for the day with my chores—what should I do now?”

“I just placed a very large order with Mark Brooks’s company. I’d like you to spend some time rearranging the shelves so we have room for all of the new products he’ll bring,” Lewis instructed.

“The first shipment is coming in two weeks, correct?” Alice asked.

Lewis looked at Alice with curiosity. “That’s right. How did you know?”

Alice felt her cheeks flush. “Mr. Brooks mentioned it as he was leaving.”

“Hmph,” Lewis cleared his throat.

“Excuse me?” Alice asked.

“He mentioned he had enjoyed meeting you. I wondered if he was going to try to court you” Lewis stared right into Alice’s eyes. “I told him he had better treat you well, otherwise, he would have to deal with me—not to mention Cletus. Besides the fact that you’re my sister-in-law, you’re also one of the best employees I’ve ever had.”

Alice felt happy that Lewis was being overprotective of her. She appreciated that her brother-in-law was looking out for her best interests. “Well, I should probably get back to work.”

“Alice?” Lewis called after her.

Alice turned around. “Yes?”

“You tell me if he gives you any trouble at all, do you understand? I wouldn’t want to do business with a man who made my family feel uncomfortable,” Lewis said. Although his voice was calm, Alice could tell his words were serious.

“Thank you, Lewis,” Alice replied. “I will.”

Lewis smiled as Alice began to rearrange the merchandise on each of the shelves at the front of the store. He and his wife were lucky to have Alice around, and he didn’t want anything to jeopardize that.

Chapter 3

Over the next two weeks, Alice filled her days with work, visiting Ruby, and doing her household chores. She also stayed late at the mercantile, poring over ledgers and making notes so Lewis could review them the next day.

“Wow, Alice, you really are a fast learner,” Lewis remarked.

“It’s nothing,” Alice said. “I just enjoy being helpful around the mercantile.”

“You’re more than helpful. By having you check my numbers, it’s saving me a lot of time every month,” Lewis explained. “Would you be interested in staying on here part-time, even after Ruby has the baby and comes back to work?”

Alice was thrilled that Lewis had asked her to stay on. “As long as that’s all right with Ruby, I’d like that.”

“I’m sure she’ll be glad to see you more often,” Lewis said.

“That’s true. I’d be happy to spend more time with her, too.” Alice couldn’t believe that after only a few weeks, she felt like she had worked at the mercantile for years. She was glad she was helping Lewis spend less time on the books. As a husband and father with a growing family, he deserved more free time to spend with Ruby and the children.

Alice was so busy with work and family that she almost forgot about the man who had asked her out on a date. One morning, a young boy came into the mercantile early in the morning, and Alice smiled at him. “How can I help you?” Lewis was in the back, paying bills.

The young boy pointed outside. “My boss is out there with a big shipment. Where should we take it?”

“Let me get the owner of the mercantile. He’ll tell you where to go.” Alice walked to the back of the mercantile. “Lewis, I think there’s a delivery here.”

“Oh, good!” Lewis stood up, looking relieved. “We’re nearly out of some of the items from Mr. Brooks’s company. It will be good to have them back in stock.”

“Mr. Brooks?” Alice blushed as she recalled the man who had

made her feel so odd just a few weeks earlier.

Lewis frowned. "Yes, is there something wrong with that?"

"Oh, not at all. I just forgot he was coming." Alice looked down at the ground and turned to go back to the front of the mercantile.

Lewis shook his head. He couldn't tell if Alice was scared of Mark or flattered by his attention. He would never understand women. Lewis strode to the front of the mercantile and met the young boy. "Let's go outside, son. I'll show you where you can pull the wagon."

Alice watched from the window as Lewis directed Mark around to the back of the mercantile building. She retrieved a broom and dustpan from the back closet and began to sweep the store even though the floor was practically spotless. She felt nervous and jittery knowing Mark Brooks was so close.

She hated the effect the man had on her—she barely even knew him, and here she was, getting flustered at the thought of seeing him. Alice swept invisible dust into the dustpan and emptied it outside. When she got back into the store, she saw Mark, Lewis, and the young boy carrying several large crates inside.

"Hi, Alice!" Mark's face lit up when he saw her.

"Hello, Mr. Brooks," Alice said shyly, looking away instead of meeting his gaze.

"Alice, would you help us unpack these crates?" Lewis asked.

"Of course." Alice set the broom and dustpan aside, wiped her hands on the apron she wore in the shop, and joined the men in the back of the store. Lewis was directing Mark and the boy to load several of the boxes in the storage closet.

"Alice, here's a list of all the inventory. Please check each box before we stock it on the shelves. Let me know if you have any questions." Lewis handed her a stack of papers.

Alice nodded and began to review the list. Each box had been assigned a letter and a number. She checked carefully and confirmed that each box matched the corresponding letter and number on her list. Alice looked through the stack of papers. There were five pages! It would take all afternoon—and maybe even longer—to get through all this.

Alice opened the first box on the list and began to count all of the items inside. As she worked, Mark, Lewis, and the boy went outside again. A few minutes later, they returned with even more boxes.

Inside the boxes were an assortment of products from Mark's company. There were several bolts of fabric in bright colors and unique textures. There were jars of canned goods, boxes of pens and pencils, and sheaths of paper. There were also a few small figurines and other items that Alice thought Edna Petunia might enjoy.

Alice made marks on the paper indicating the number of each

item. When she got to the jars of canned goods, she noticed something odd. The paper list said there should be one dozen cans of beans, one dozen cans of peas, and one dozen jars of peaches. Instead, there was one can of beans, one can of peas, and one jar of peaches. There were also several dozen cans of corn, which Alice couldn't find anywhere on the list.

Alice checked a few more boxes. To her dismay, there were several other errors. One list said there should be fabrics with flowers on it, but in the corresponding box, there were only flour sacks. In another box, instead of fabrics, like Lewis had ordered, there were cans of pears. Alice shook her head. This didn't make any sense.

Mark, Lewis, and Mark's young helper came back into the mercantile, carrying more boxes. Mark set down his boxes and clapped his hands. "That should do the trick. We'll see you again in two weeks' time." Alice wanted to say something about the incorrect order, but she felt frozen in place.

"Thank you, Mark. See you again." Lewis waved goodbye to his new friend. "Goodbye, Toby!" Lewis called to the boy. The boy waved back, and he and Mark made their way to the door. Alice wanted to shout at them to stop but couldn't bring herself to do so.

"Everything in order?" Lewis smiled at Alice.

"Actually, it's not." Alice showed Lewis the lists and opened a few of the boxes that didn't match. "I don't know how this could have happened!"

Lewis's face grew red. "Please, excuse me." Lewis rushed out the back entrance to the mercantile. Alice followed closely behind. Mark and Toby had already climbed into their wagon and had set off for their next stop. "Wait a minute! *Wait a minute!*"

Mark stopped the wagon and looked down. "What's going on, Lewis?"

"You cheated me on my order!" Lewis fumed. Alice had never seen her brother-in-law so angry.

Mark looked genuinely puzzled. "What are you talking about?"

"Stop hiding in your wagon now and come face me like a man." Lewis's voice was deep and gritty.

Alice saw a look of fear flash across Mark's face, but he stopped the wagon and climbed out.

Toby tried to climb out, too, but Mark held up his arm to stop him. "Stay in the wagon."

Mark walked up to Lewis. "What's all this about?"

"I had Alice check your order. You haven't given us everything we ordered! And you've given us worthless items that we didn't order instead!" Lewis shouted. "What kind of business are you operating? Your uncle was a respectable man. You're just a good-for-nothing

thief!"

Alice watched, unable to move. She felt sorry for Mark, who seemed like he didn't know what to say. Then she remembered that he had cheated Lewis. He didn't need her sympathy.

"I don't know what you mean, Lewis. Please, show me what's wrong." Mark was a little afraid of Lewis Darcy. Lewis looked strong and powerful. Mark didn't want to take his chances.

"Alice, show him!" Lewis roared.

Alice held out the papers she had been carrying and showed a few of the notes she had made to Mark. She felt embarrassed on his behalf. "This box . . . this one . . . and this one."

Mark smoothed back his hair. "I can't tell you what happened. I am so, so sorry. This won't happen again, I can assure you."

"You're right it won't! I'm no longer doing business with you. You can consider our contract null and void!" Lewis folded his arms and glared at Mark.

Mark opened his mouth to protest, but then stopped. "Lewis, I made a mistake."

"Several mistakes!" Lewis cried.

"Several mistakes," Mark repeated. "I completely understand if you never want to see me again. But please, I want to make this right. I'll do whatever it takes to correct your order. Then, once it's done, if you still never want to see me again, I'll respect that."

Lewis looked suspicious. "How are you going to correct it?"

Mark was at a loss for words, but he soon recovered. "First, I need to go back to the warehouse and discuss with the men who did the packing for me. I'll find out what happened and make sure it doesn't happen again. Next, I'll come back here and make a delivery each day until your order is perfect."

"How can I be sure you're telling the truth?" Lewis shifted his weight from one foot to another.

Mark thought for a moment. "I'll return your deposit you gave me."

Lewis frowned. "Why would you do that?"

"My uncle told me you were one of his best and most loyal customers. I would hate for this to ruin our friendship. I believe I can earn your trust again." Mark looked back at Toby. "We should get back now so we can begin to sort out this mess."

"Hm." Lewis still didn't seem convinced.

"I'll bring your deposit back tomorrow. In cash," Mark promised.

Lewis looked Mark in the eyes. "Why should I believe you?"

"I'm good for it," Mark said, meeting his gaze.

"I suppose we'll find that out tomorrow," Lewis said gruffly. "But I appreciate your gesture. Let's get back inside, Alice. We've got a lot of

work to do.”

Alice nodded and realized she had been holding her breath. Before she could turn to follow Lewis into the store, she noticed Mark waving at her with a small sad smile. Alice waved back, hoping Lewis wouldn't see and get annoyed. She went back into the mercantile, where Lewis was complaining about Mark.

“I can't believe that man, acting like he's some expert, then he comes and delivers the *wrong* shipment! Who does he think I am? A man he can fool?” Lewis paced back and forth across the mercantile.

“I didn't get the impression that he thinks that of you, Lewis. It's possible they were all honest mistakes.” Alice hoped she wasn't overstepping, but she could tell something was bothering Lewis.

Lewis nodded. “I'm just worried about all of our customers and being able to provide them the items that they need.”

“That makes sense.” Alice hoped she could get Lewis's mind off the error. He seemed to be getting worked up, and Alice knew Ruby wouldn't like him to come up when he was so upset. “Do you still want me to unpack the merchandise that is correct?”

“Yes, I suppose that would be helpful. Thank you.” Lewis wandered back toward his desk.

Alice went to the back room of the mercantile and began checking her lists again. It was shaping up to be a long day.



THE FOLLOWING DAY, Alice was washing the windows of the mercantile when Mark's wagon pulled up. He was alone this time. Mark parked the wagon nearby and carried a single box toward the mercantile.

“Good morning.” Mark set the box on the ground next to Alice and watched her work.

“How are you?” Alice wanted to be polite but was cautious based on the previous day's events. She didn't know if she could trust Mark.

“I'm fine. I've brought some fabric for Lewis that was missing from yesterday's order as well as the money he paid me up front,” Mark explained.

“You should probably go in there and talk to him about that.” Alice kept her attention fixed on the windows.

“Alice, please look at me for a second.” Mark rested a hand gently on her arm.

Alice felt a tingling sensation on her arm where he had touched her that spread throughout her entire body, making her feel warm and happy. “Yes?”

Mark took a deep breath. “It would make me feel terrible if I knew

you didn't trust me. Can you please give me another chance? I'm still trying to figure out how to run my uncle's business. I made a mistake, and I'm doing everything I can to make it up to you and your family."

Alice considered this carefully. She was fiercely protective of her family and didn't trust anyone who would try to cheat them in any way, as Lewis had accused Mark of doing. "I don't know."

Mark nodded sadly. "I understand." He bent down to pick up the box again. Alice opened the front entrance for him. Through the window, Alice could see Lewis come out and greet Mark.

Alice wasn't sure what to think. It was a good sign that Mark had come back with the money Lewis had paid him. That meant he was probably not one of the corrupt traveling salesman Cletus had warned the family about. Nowhere didn't get too many of those because it was a small town with very few citizens. That meant there was less money to be swindled, so crooks and thieves didn't often stop there on their way to larger cities.

She still didn't know much about him, though. She decided to focus on her work at the mercantile and try to forget about the man and the way he made her feel. Even if he had kept his word today, she didn't know if she could trust him fully. One thing was certain. She was very glad she had declined his invitation to dinner. If word got out that she had gone out to dinner with a possibly corrupt businessman, that would reflect poorly not only on her, but also on her whole family.

Alice finished cleaning the windows and went inside the mercantile. Lewis and Mark were still talking in hushed tones in the corner. Alice gathered all the rugs and took them outside to clean them.

As she beat the rugs together and dust flurried everywhere, she admired the humid heat of the day. Living in Nowhere was much different than living in Orlan, New York, where she and her sisters had hailed from. She favored the warmer climate and was glad that she'd ended up here. It felt like the exact right place for her.

A little while later, Mark came out of the mercantile, no longer carrying the large box. He had a smile on his face. "Beautiful day, isn't it?"

"Actually, I was just thinking that myself." Alice was surprised at Mark's cheery tone, considering the situation at hand.

Mark smiled. "Lewis and I had a good talk. I still have a lot of work to do, but he appreciated that I made an extra delivery today and that I returned his money. I hope that I'll be able to make it up to him."

Alice nodded her head and held the rugs still for a moment, not wanting to get dust all over Mark.

“And more importantly, I hope I’ll be able to make it up to you,” Mark added.

Alice could feel her pulse race faster. “Me? What do I have to do with all of this?”

“You’re my future wife. I need to earn your trust so you accept when I propose to you.” Mark spoke the words as calmly and confidently as if he were telling her that the sky was blue or grass was green.

Alice felt a bit overheated and dizzy, like she wanted to lie down. Who did this man think he was? She had never met anyone as sure of himself despite his many mistakes. He clearly had faults and was working to improve them, which seemed like a good thing. But she hadn’t known him long enough to understand if his word was as good as he seemed to think it was.

Mark could sense that he’d gone a bit too far. “Alice, I’m sorry. I’ve said too much. I would never want to make you uncomfortable in any way. Please, forgive me.”

“Of course.” Alice still felt a little ill. She wanted to go home and lie down, but her work ethic was too strong to leave in the middle of a day’s work.

“Before I go, I have something for you.” Mark pulled out a small, gift-wrapped package for Alice.

“What’s this?” Alice was confused.

Mark held the gift out. Alice set down the rugs and brushed her hands off on her apron. She accepted the gift and began to unwrap it.

Inside the wrapping paper was a small blue book. Alice opened it, and there were lined sheets of paper inside.

“I saw you doing many calculations yesterday and reading through Lewis’s ledgers. I thought you might like having your own book to write them in,” Mark explained.

Alice couldn’t believe he’d brought a gift just for her. “Thank you,” she said, touched that he had noticed her reviewing the ledgers. She had to admit, there was a part of her that was thrilled to learn he had paid such close attention to her. And the book would certainly be useful as she began to help Lewis out more with the mercantile.

“I promise I’ll stop bothering you soon, but I do have one question before I go,” Mark continued.

“What’s that?” Alice looked back toward the mercantile. She did have more chores to attend to, but she also enjoyed speaking with Mark.

“Pardon me for saying this, but you seem different than other young women I’ve met around here. Did you grow up in Nowhere?” Mark hoped he wasn’t being impolite.

To his relief, Alice smiled. “As a matter of fact, I didn’t. I was born

in New York and orphaned as a baby. I grew up in an orphanage there. A few years ago, my sisters and I moved here to Nowhere and were adopted by Edna Petunia and Cletus Sanders.”

“Cletus Sanders? That’s the town judge, isn’t it? I remember my uncle mentioning his name!” Mark seemed excited about the connection.

“Yes, that’s my adoptive father. He and Edna Petunia have done everything to make us feel at home here in Nowhere,” Alice continued.

“My uncle always said he was a great man,” Mark reminisced. “So was my uncle.”

For the first time, Alice realized that Mark was probably still grieving the loss of his uncle. She hadn’t really thought about his struggles because he presented himself as a strong, confident man. But the more she thought about it, she realized that he was probably having a very challenging time. “I’m very sorry for your loss.”

Mark looked at Alice intently. “Thank you, Alice. I appreciate that. I miss him every day.”

Alice wanted to change the subject. She felt a bit awkward talking about Mark’s late uncle. “Since I answered your questions, maybe you can answer one of mine.”

“Of course. Ask away.” Mark grinned.

“Where did you grow up?” Alice figured she’d start with a basic inquiry.

“I was born in Austin. My parents own a small shop there, selling many of my uncle’s products. But I was the youngest of five children, and they had too many mouths to feed. They sent me to live with my uncle when I was just a boy,” Mark explained.

“Was that hard to be away from your parents and siblings?” Alice had never known her biological parents, so she didn’t know what it would be like to have to move away from them. But she knew she’d be devastated if she had to leave her sisters. Over the years, the girls had become inseparable.

Mark shrugged. “I don’t remember much about my time in Austin. Most of my earliest memories are of my uncle.” He looked off into the distance, lost in thought. “My job was to help him with deliveries, and he always told me that one day, the business would be mine. But we always thought we had several years before he passed. He never taught me about inventory or packing shipments or working with the people who make the products. When he died, I found myself adrift in a world I knew almost nothing about.”

“That must have been very difficult.” Alice surprised herself by putting her arm on Mark’s wrist. She felt sorry for Mark. He hadn’t been raised with his parents or siblings, and now he had lost his

closest relative. Alice couldn't imagine what that would feel like, to be all alone in the world.

Mark's face brightened. "It is difficult, but that's enough about me and my sad story. I don't like to dwell on the negative. Ironically, that was something I learned from my uncle. He was always positive, even when he fell ill."

"That does seem like a good habit. I also try to adopt a positive attitude," Alice agreed.

"In that case, I think it's my turn to ask you a question." Mark liked that Alice's hand was still resting on his wrist. He enjoyed any opportunity to be close to this lovely young woman.

"I thought you said you were going to let me get back to work." Alice tried to wear a stern expression, but she couldn't keep from giggling.

Soon, Mark was laughing, too. "I wish I didn't have to go, but I'm afraid you're right. I did promise I'd let you get back to work. I have a feeling that Lewis wouldn't like it if I stole his star employee. Although . . ."

"Although what?" Alice asked, hanging onto Mark's every word. She had never met anyone like him before. She was fascinated by every word he said. Even though she knew she needed to get back to work, she could have listened to him talk to her all day.

"One day, it is going to be my fault that you can't work in the mercantile anymore." A mischievous grin danced across Mark's lips.

"Is that so?" Alice felt the same fluttering feeling in her stomach as Mark leaned in toward her.

Mark nodded, putting his mouth up to Alice's ear and whispering. "It's going to be the day I make you my wife."

As Mark returned to his wagon with a jaunty wave, Alice couldn't move. Her entire body felt heated, and she felt the new tingling sensation in her stomach spreading out across her lower body. She loved the way she had felt when Mark whispered in her ear. For the first time, she thought about what it would be like if he touched her in other places. Alice tried to gather her thoughts so she could get back to work, but she couldn't. She was reeling.

Chapter 4

When Mark arrived at the mercantile the following morning with a new shipment, he looked dejected. Alice couldn't help but speak up.

"What's wrong?" Alice asked as she opened the door to the mercantile. It was before eight o'clock and Lewis hadn't yet come downstairs. She went back to the counter and began scrubbing it with a wet rag.

Mark sighed. "I feel like everyone in this town doesn't like me very much. No one seems to trust me at all."

"What do you mean by that?" Alice was perplexed. She had found the people of Nowhere to be kind and helpful at all times.

"Since I have daily meetings with Lewis, I thought it might be a good idea to rent a room in a boarding house so I don't need to drive back and forth several times a day," Mark explained. "But I visited three boarding houses yesterday, and all said they were full even though they didn't seem crowded at all."

Alice thought about this for a moment. "That seems odd to me, but maybe they really don't have any space left. Is there anything else troubling you?"

"Yes, there is," Mark admitted. "I went to the ice cream parlor last evening because I was craving something sweet. The man behind the counter said something very odd. I told him about my business, and he said, 'Oh, yes, I've heard all about your business.' What does that mean?"

Alice nodded in understanding. "Nowhere is a small town. Word travels fast here. I'm guessing that people have heard about the mistakes with the shipment. People here do tend to take some time before they trust outsiders."

Mark shook his head sadly. "I don't know if I'll have enough time."

"What do you mean by that?" Alice began to buff the counter with a dry cloth.

"At a certain point, if I don't have enough customers, I'll have to leave and focus my sales on a different area," Mark told her. "But I'd like to stay here as long as I can."

Alice's heart sank as she imagined Mark moving on to the next town. She wondered if he had a young woman waiting for him in every town, and that made her feel even worse. Was she just a pretty face to him, or did he mean it when he said he wanted to marry her? Alice remembered Cletus's warnings about men who traveled for a living. She didn't want to get her hopes up or give away her trust too freely. At the same time, she also didn't want to lose Mark just yet.

"What are you thinking?" Mark asked, noticing that Alice had been quiet.

"Oh, nothing worth saying out loud." Alice was embarrassed that she had been thinking about Mark in a romantic way. She wasn't usually one to daydream, and she was *not* about to start now!

"I think you're being modest. I always enjoy hearing what you have to say," Mark said, looking at Alice directly, his dark eyes boring into her.

Alice looked down at the counter, avoiding eye contact. It was spotless. "I really need to get back to my other chores," Alice said apologetically.

"Of course, don't let me keep you." Mark gathered up his documents and went over to his usual spot at the table. He always waited there while Lewis helped customers, pulling out a small notebook and writing in it until Lewis was available.

Alice changed the sign in the front window to "Open" and went back to the counter. A few minutes later, Lewis rushed in, a harried expression on his face. "Are you all right, Lewis?" Alice hoped everything was okay with Ruby and the baby.

Lewis nodded. "I'm fine. But Ruby is sicker than I knew. We had to call for Dr. Harvey last night. Fortunately, she's resting now, and Dr. Harvey said the baby is fine."

Alice was glad to hear that Ruby's baby wasn't in danger. "What happened?"

Lewis shook his head. "You know how your sister can be. I had told her to relax and rest as much as possible. But she was apparently cooking and cleaning for hours while I was here at work."

Alice sighed. "That sounds just like Ruby."

"She did say she's feeling a bit better than a few years back when she needed Sarah Jane's help." Lewis folded his hands together. "I think she just thought since she was feeling better, she could do more."

"I'm glad she's not that sick. That was a very scary time for all of us." Alice remembered that the entire family had been on edge, worried about Ruby and the baby. "I hope she'll actually rest and take it easy. Is there anything I can help with? I'd be glad to cook or clean on my breaks from the mercantile."

Lewis's face brightened. "Alice, you don't need to do that. You're already doing so much around the mercantile."

"It would be a nice break to see my nieces and nephews," Alice laughed. "Please, Lewis. Let me help you!"

"Maybe just a little. I don't want Edna Petunia to come down here and tell me I'm taking up too much of your time." Lewis scratched his head.

Alice didn't know if Lewis was joking or not, but she had to admit, that sounded like something Edna Petunia might do. "I'll go on lunch breaks and just before and after work."

"Thank you, Alice. I appreciate it. I don't know what we'd do without you." As Lewis talked, he looked around the store. No customers were there yet, but he spotted Mark sitting in his usual seat in the corner. "Oh, Mark is already here? I suppose I should go talk to him."

"Yes, he got here a little while ago while I was opening the store." Alice watched as Lewis went over to Mark and greeted him. Lewis seemed to be warming up after the first day when they had uncovered the issue with the order.

Alice knew there was a stack of canned beans in the back that needed to be stocked onto the shelves. She went to the back of the mercantile and gathered as many cans as she could fit in the white apron she wore when she worked.

She carefully walked over to the shelves and began stacking the cans one by one. Two customers came into the store, and Alice went up to them.

"How can I help you today?" Alice greeted the couple pleasantly.

"I'm looking for fabric for new curtains," an elderly woman who seemed older than Edna Petunia said.

"I don't know why you think you need new curtains. Nothing is wrong with the old curtains!" the older man standing next to her complained.

Alice smiled. "We have several lovely pieces of fabric I think you may like. You can take a look at it."

"That would be lovely, dear." Both older people followed Alice to the fabric section. Alice showed the woman all of the options.

"I don't remember this pattern. Is it new?" The woman pointed to one of the bolts of floral fabric that Mark had delivered.

"Yes, that was actually sold by the man over there, talking to Lewis." Alice pointed in their direction. "We just received them this week, and there will be more coming in different designs."

"That's nice, dear," the woman said absentmindedly as she browsed through the fabrics.

Her husband stared at Mark. "Who is that man? He looks familiar,

but I can't place him."

"His name is Mark Brooks, and he recently inherited his business from his uncle," Alice explained.

The man snapped his fingers. "Oh, yes! I knew his uncle. Mark resembles him!" Then the man frowned. "I heard he was going around, trying to sell anything he could to anyone who would buy from him."

His wife spun around and eyed Mark suspiciously. "How should we know if we can trust him?"

Alice hesitated. She wanted to tell them that Mark was true to his word, but she still didn't know him all that well.

The older woman continued. "I think he's just another crooked businessman, trying to swindle the hardworking people of Nowhere out of their money!"

"Is there a reason you think that?" Alice asked gently. She now understood why Mark had said that the people of Nowhere seemed to have something against him.

"Not yet. But I don't trust him!" the woman practically shouted.

Her husband patted her arm. "Now you've gone and upset yourself, Dolly. Are you sure you need this fabric for the curtains? We could come back tomorrow."

Dolly thought about this. "Maybe. I would feel more comfortable if that man wasn't in here while I'm trying to shop. What's he doing, anyway?"

"He and Mr. Darcy are discussing some business affairs," Alice said simply.

"Hmph." The older gentleman shook his head. "We'll come back another day."

The couple shuffled out of the shop, casting wary looks at Mark. Alice watched as they walked out the door. Lewis and Mark didn't look up from their discussion. Alice wondered what they were talking about that had them both so focused on the conversation. She was glad that they hadn't heard the older couple's conversation. She had a feeling that it would have made Mark feel terrible.

Alice returned to unpacking the cans of beans and arranging them on the shelves. She tried a few configurations before she decided which one was best. When she was finished, a few other customers walked in, so she went over to help them.

Soon, it was time for lunch. Alice looked around after the last customer of the morning left the mercantile and realized that Mark was gone. She switched the "Open" sign to "Closed" and found Lewis at his desk, reviewing paperwork.

"Did Mr. Brooks leave?" Alice asked, hoping she didn't sound nosy.

"Yes, he went back to his warehouse. I still don't know if I can

fully trust him, Alice, but I do appreciate that he's trying." Lewis rubbed his eyes.

"Lewis, you should get some rest. You seem exhausted." Alice hoped she wasn't being rude, but her brother-in-law looked terrible.

"I'll get rest this evening, after all my work is done and my family is provided for," Lewis said. Alice could tell from his tone that there was no changing his mind.

She left Lewis alone with his thoughts in the mercantile as she went upstairs to prepare lunch for Ruby and the children.

Chapter 5

When Alice walked into the Darcy family's living quarters, she saw Ruby putting a pot on the stove.

"Ruby Darcy, you need to lie down and rest," Alice said sternly. She tried to imitate Edna Petunia's and Cletus's tone when they were giving the girls a serious talk.

Ruby looked up in surprise. "Alice, what are you doing here?"

"I'm here to help you. I'm not going to do anything until you lie down, though," Alice said with a smile. She helped her sister, who had started to show a bit, lie down on the sofa.

Little Jasper raced into the living room. "Aunt Alice!" Jasper flung his arms around his aunt as Ruby eased her body down onto the sofa.

"Hello, Jasper. Do you want to be my helper today?" Alice asked, a gleam in her eye. If she could keep Jasper busy, then maybe Ruby could get some sleep.

Ruby wasn't going down without a fight, though. "Alice, you're already doing so much for our family. You're helping at the mercantile every day, and you're also helping with the books. Lewis says you're a natural. I don't want to burden you with even more work."

Alice shook her head. "Ruby, it's no trouble at all. Normally, I eat my lunch downstairs with a book. Instead, I'll come up here, fix lunch for you and the children, and eat with you all."

Ruby sighed. "I don't know. I hate that I feel so helpless."

"You're not helpless. You're still doing a lot around the house—I know. Lewis told me," Alice said, staring at her sister. She wasn't going to budge. She knew how important it was that her sister get a lot of rest.

Ruby looked down guiltily. "It's just so difficult for me to sit still. I want to do everything I can to make sure my baby is healthy and happy—but I still need to take care of all of the other children, too."

Alice felt awful. Ruby seemed like she was about to burst into tears at any moment. She put a reassuring hand on Ruby's shoulder. "It's going to be all right, Ruby. You're probably just tired. Lewis looked tired, too."

Ruby nodded sadly. "We both couldn't get much sleep last night.

One of the twins had an earache, and we were up all night taking turns checking on her.”

“Is she feeling better?” Alice wondered.

“Yes, the girls are playing in the bedroom,” Ruby replied.

“I’m glad to hear that. But now, it’s time for you to get some sleep. You can lie down here or go to your bedroom if you’d like. I’m going to make lunch—and Jasper is going to help me!” Alice held out her hand to Jasper, and he took it. She led him into the kitchen and looked through the pantry.

Jasper helped Alice get all of the vegetables and spices out. Alice carefully combined them to create a stew. As the stew simmered, Alice went back into the living room to make sure Ruby was following her instructions. Ruby slept peacefully on the sofa, right where Alice had left her.

Next, Alice went into the bedroom where Ruby’s daughters were playing with dolls made out of cloth fabric. “Hello, girls!”

The twins stood up to hug their aunt, and the youngest girl gurgled on the floor. Alice knelt down and kissed her on the top of her head.

Alice’s heart felt full surrounded by her nieces and nephew. She imagined having a home of her own one day that she would fill with all of her favorite books and decorations. And, much more importantly, a husband and children. She wondered if they would look like her, as Ruby’s youngest daughter looked just like Ruby. Or maybe her children would take after their father.

Suddenly, Alice thought about Mark’s features and how they might look on a child with her fair skin and coloring. Alice gasped, surprised by her own thoughts.

“What’s wrong, Aunt Alice?” one of the girls cried.

Alice smiled. “Oh, it’s nothing, sweetheart. I just remembered something, and it startled me.”

“What did you remember?” the other twin asked.

“It’s something that won’t make sense to you now, but it will when you’re older.” Alice stood up and brushed her hands off on her lap. “Who’s ready for some lunch?”

The girls followed her lead and cheered. The twins helped their younger sister toddle into the kitchen. Alice served all of the children a bowl of soup and also prepared one for herself. She decided to let Ruby sleep a little while longer, so she kept the stew over the heat while they ate.

Alice loved spending time with Ruby and Lewis’s children, and she decided she’d help out around the Darcy household much more often. She knew she may never get the chance to have a family of her own, so she was going to have to be content with her numerous nieces and nephews.

As Alice listened to one of Jasper's stories, she realized it was almost one o'clock—the time the mercantile re-opened after lunch. She poured a bowl of soup for Ruby and set it on the table, then gently woke her sister up.

"I'm going back downstairs to work now. I made you some soup. It's in the kitchen," Alice told her sister softly.

Ruby smiled. "I already feel much better. I didn't realize how badly I needed some rest. I can't thank you enough, Alice."

"No need to thank me. I know you'd do the same if our positions were reversed," Alice said. "Now, I should get back to work before your husband wonders where I am!"

"That's right," Ruby said, remembering. "He told me he had so much to do today that he wasn't going to be able to come upstairs for lunch. Please make sure he doesn't work too hard."

"Of course." Alice smiled at her sister. Ruby and Lewis were two peas in a pod. She just hoped that for their sakes they would be able to find a little time for rest and relaxation. Soon, there would be a new baby in their home that would require undivided attention and love.

When Alice got downstairs, Lewis was still at his desk with several papers scattered in front of him. Alice changed the sign on the door back to "Open." A few eager customers strolled in, and Lewis came to the front to join Alice in helping them. The afternoon rushed by, and soon it was time for dinner.

Alice insisted on preparing dinner for Ruby and her family. Lewis finished paperwork downstairs in the mercantile while Alice made fried chicken, one of Edna Petunia's favorite recipes, in the kitchen. Alice wasn't hungry, since she knew she would get a full meal at the Sanders' house in a short time, so she said goodbye to the Darcy family and walked downstairs. She found Lewis at the bottom of the stairwell.

"Thank you, Alice. I'll see you tomorrow," Lewis called as he walked up the stairs.

"You're welcome. Good night!" Alice prepared to walk out the front door. She had a key that she could use to lock it for the night. When she got outside, she was startled to see Mark Brooks waiting outside the door. "What are you doing here?"

"I was hoping to ask Lewis a question about some products he ordered from my uncle several months ago. I'm trying to balance my books, and something's not quite right," Mark explained. "But I see that the mercantile is closed. I'll come back again tomorrow."

"You came all this way? You were just here this morning." Alice was shocked. Did Mark have any other customers besides the ones in Nowhere?

Mark looked sheepish. "I'm still looking for a place to stay in Nowhere. I hoped that if I went around and introduced myself to people, they would allow me to stay. So far, I haven't found a place yet. Instead of making the drive back, I thought I'd stop in and see if Lewis had any ideas."

Alice looked through the window to the clock on the wall in the mercantile. She had a short window of time that she could use without being late to dinner. She pushed open the door again and held it open for Mark. "Come on in. I'll try to help you, but it has to be quick."

Mark's eyes widened. "Thank you, Alice." He pulled a few leather-bound ledgers out of his briefcase and set them down on the table in the mercantile.

Alice went to the back of the mercantile and retrieved a book that showed all of Lewis's orders from the past two years. She brought it to the front of the room and sat down next to Mark at the table. "What seems to be the issue?"

Mark opened one of his books and flipped through to a page where he had circled a few notes. "This doesn't match up with my accounting records." He pulled out another book. "See?" As Mark pointed toward the line in question, his arm brushed against Alice's shoulder. A ripple of pleasure moved throughout her body. She felt her face flush. She moved her chair away slightly. She needed to focus if she was going to help Mark in time for dinner at the Sanders' home.

Alice opened Lewis's ledger and found dates that matched up with Mark's books. She pulled out a notepad and pencil and did a few quick calculations. "I see. I think your uncle may have made an error when he wrote this down. Lewis ordered four crates of dishes, but your uncle wrote down six. That means it probably looks like you received less money than you were owed."

Mark looked at Alice in amazement. "How did you figure that out so quickly?"

Alice looked down modestly. "I've always enjoyed arithmetic."

"You've probably saved me hours of searching for this error, Alice," Mark told her. "I'd love to do something for you in return." He leaned a little closer to her.

Alice felt conflicted. She loved the feeling of Mark moving closer to her, and she desperately wanted to be close to him. At the same time, she felt improper being alone with him in the mercantile after hours. She had taken a chance, knowing that she could help him quickly and hopefully save Lewis time later, but she was starting to think that she had made a mistake.

Mark couldn't help himself. He knew his actions were probably crossing the line, but he had felt an undeniable magnetic pull toward

Alice since the moment he had met her. She was beautiful and skilled at everything she set out to do. And now she had demonstrated that she also had an impressive intellect to complement her looks. She was everything he had always imagined wanting in a wife.

Mark wasn't sure what more he could do. He had told her that he intended to marry her and asked her out on a proper date. She had rebuffed his advances at every turn, and yet he couldn't stop thinking about her. Although he also felt strongly about making things right with Lewis, the only reason he was making daily check-ins at the mercantile was to be close to Alice whenever possible. He had other employees who could have easily made the deliveries. But he had grown accustomed to getting a warm smile and pleasantries from Alice, and he couldn't stop.

Mark wanted to kiss Alice, but he didn't know how she would react. Still, he couldn't help but drift closer and closer to her. Alice seemed like she wanted him to kiss her, too. She was staring at him with what he hoped was longing in her eyes. Mark closed his eyes and pressed his lips to hers. Mark felt an immediate connection with Alice as soon as they touched. His only thoughts were how he could explore more of Alice's delicate body.

Suddenly, a loud voice rang throughout the room, startling Mark and Alice, who sprang back from each other. "What on earth is going on in here?"

Alice meekly looked up. It was Lewis.

"I came down here to get a few papers I wanted to review tonight, and I see you two in here consorting like this?" Lewis seemed upset. "I thought I could trust you, Mark. But it appears you just wanted to take advantage of my sister-in-law."

"Please, let me explain—" Mark protested.

"I've seen enough. Alice, I'll take you home." Lewis said the words with finality. It was a command, not a request.

Alice opened her mouth to say something, but the look on Lewis's face made her change her mind.

Mark gathered his things. He looked at Alice one last time. "Thank you, Alice, for your help. I'm sorry that I crossed the line. It won't happen again." Mark tipped his hat to both Alice and Lewis and exited through the front door.

"I'm disappointed in you, Alice," Lewis told her. Alice looked down at the floor. "Let's get in the wagon."

Lewis and Alice both went outside, and Alice finally finished locking the door. If only Mark hadn't interrupted her the first time, she would be home right now with Edna Petunia, Cletus, and the other sisters who still lived in the family home. They would be laughing and preparing for dinner. Now, she had upset and offended

Lewis, who she knew was only looking out for her.

Lewis helped Alice climb into the wagon, and she sank low into her seat, feeling embarrassed and ashamed. Still, there was a small part of her that kept replaying the moment Mark's lips had met hers over and over again. When he had kissed her, she'd felt alive and invincible, like nothing could ever hurt her. She wished they hadn't been interrupted, so Mark could do it again. A little shiver ran up her spine as she thought about Mark. His lips had been soft and had felt wonderful against her mouth.

Lewis sighed loudly, and Alice snapped back to attention. "I'm sorry, Lewis. I know I let you down."

"I just don't want to see you getting hurt, Alice. That's all." Lewis flicked the reins and the horses took off, headed for the Sanders' house.

Lewis didn't say anything else on the short trip, and Alice didn't have anything she wanted to talk about. She was embarrassed that Lewis had walked in on her in such an intimate embrace. Then again, Mark should have known better than to kiss her in Lewis's place of business. And she wasn't blameless—she had kissed Mark back. Alice looked forward to arriving home and getting out of the wagon so she didn't have to sit in uncomfortable silence with her brother-in-law.

Chapter 6

When they got to the house, Lewis surprised Alice by parking the wagon and getting out alongside her. He tied the horses up and walked toward the front door.

“What are you doing?” Alice was confused.

“I need to have a talk with Edna Petunia and Cletus,” Lewis explained.

Alice’s stomach churned. “About me?”

“It’s for your own good, Alice.” Lewis pounded on the door.

Martha, another one of Alice’s sisters, answered. “Hi, Lewis,” Martha said, brightening a bit. Lewis was kind and protective of all of his sisters-in-law, and they liked him, too.

“Hi, Martha. I need to have a word with Edna Petunia and Cletus before you all sit down to supper.” Lewis looked at Alice with a grim expression on his face.

Alice wished she could melt into the floor. Martha’s eyes widened, and she ran off to find her adoptive parents.

Cletus came to the door a few moments later. “Hello, son. What’s all this about?” He shook his son-in-law’s hand. Lewis was normally a level-headed man, but he seemed a bit shaken to Cletus. Cletus wondered what had riled him.

“I’d like to speak with you and Edna Petunia privately.” Lewis shoved his hands into his pockets.

“Sure, son.” Cletus led Lewis into his formal sitting parlor. “Edna! Come in here, snickerdoodle!” Alice shook her head and went into the kitchen to see if she could help her sisters get ready for dinner.

Edna Petunia strode into the formal sitting parlor a minute later and took a seat next to Cletus. Lewis was sitting across from them. “What’s all this about? Is it Ruby?”

“No, Ruby is resting comfortably. She’s sick, but she’ll be fine. What I’d like to talk to you about is Alice,” Lewis began, his mouth set in a firm line.

“You’d better not tell me Alice is pregnant!” Cletus joked.

“Well . . .” Lewis trailed off.

“I need some cough medicine.” Edna Petunia pulled a small flask

out, unscrewed the lid, and gulped down some liquid.

Despite himself, Lewis stifled a grin. Ruby had told him that all the girls suspected that it wasn't actually cough syrup in Edna Petunia's ever-present flask. They had a feeling it was something a little more scandalous. No one begrudged her for it, however. She was a good woman who had led a long, colorful life, and none of her adopted daughters felt it was their place to confront her about it. "Don't worry, Edna Petunia. It's not that. But I'm worried that's where things are headed."

"Son, you'd better start explaining yourself, quickly," Cletus said crossly. "I should be eating my supper right now, not listening to you gossip about one of my daughters."

"Yes, sir." Lewis nodded his head. "I'm sorry about that. I just—Alice was locking up the mercantile, and a man I've been doing business with, Mark Brooks—he apparently asked her if he could come in after we were closed for the day. When I came downstairs to get something I'd left behind, I saw him kissing her!"

Cletus frowned. "Now you've got my attention. What kind of man is this Mark Brooks?"

Lewis looked bewildered. "That's the thing, sir. I just don't know. He seems friendly and polite, and we've talked for quite a while before. I was coming to know and trust him. He inherited the business from his uncle when the older man passed. But the first shipment he delivered since he took over had several mistakes in it. I thought he was trying to cheat me."

Edna Petunia hiccupped loudly, and both men turned to look at her. "What are you looking at me for? Proceed with your story."

Lewis let out a long exhale. "I'm only telling you both this because you know how much I care about Alice. I love her as if she were my own little sister, because in a way, she is. I can't stand the thought of anyone hurting her or taking advantage of her."

"You did the right thing, son. Edna Petunia and I will take this under advisement. Thank you for coming to us." Cletus stood up and rested his hand on Lewis's shoulder. "Now, if you'll excuse us, I have a roast to eat!"

Edna Petunia took another long sip from her flask. Lewis and Cletus stared at her again, and she shrugged. "That was a distressing story! It might bring on one of my coughing attacks. I'm just taking a precaution."

Cletus chuckled as he showed Lewis out. "You take extra good care of our Ruby. We've heard she's been feeling ill."

"Thank you," Lewis said as he walked over to his horses.

"Oh, I know!" Edna Petunia shouted, racing out to meet him. She reached deep into her bosom and pulled out three peppermint sticks.

"These will soothe Ruby's stomach! Take them to her."

"Oh, no, I wouldn't want to take your snacks," Lewis protested. He had always been a little disturbed by Edna Petunia's comfort food—more specifically, by the location she stored her comfort food in.

"Don't worry, I have lots more where those came from!" Edna Petunia dug further down into her bosom and produced two more. "How many do you think she'd like?"

"Oh, no, thank you, though, Edna Petunia." Lewis felt like he might be getting ill.

"I insist!" Edna Petunia declared, waving the five sticks in front of his face.

Lewis sighed. He knew his mother-in-law, and there was no way he was escaping this situation without accepting her peppermint sticks. He thanked his lucky stars that he had a handkerchief in his shirt pocket. He pulled it out and wrapped it around the peppermint sticks, then tucked the bundle into his pants pocket. "Thank you, Edna Petunia. I'm sure Ruby will appreciate this."

"You're welcome. Good night!" Edna Petunia waved as Lewis untied his horses and climbed into his wagon.

"Now can we finally eat?" Cletus complained from the porch. He was starving.

"Don't you want to talk first?" Edna Petunia asked.

"I need to eat first. Then we'll sort all this out." Cletus led Edna Petunia into the kitchen, where all the girls who lived at home waited for them. Hattie sprang to her feet and began to cut and serve the pot roast lying in the center of the table.

As Edna Petunia began to dig into her food, she caught Alice's eye. Alice looked down at the table, embarrassed. She could tell that Edna Petunia knew everything. She was glad that at least Lewis had not told the entire family what had happened, but she was still angry that Edna Petunia and Cletus knew. She wondered what they would do about it.

Dinner seemed to go on for a very long time.

"Do you think Ruby's baby will be a boy or a girl?" Katie asked.

"I think it will be a boy," Hattie said. "I just have a feeling."

"The baby has an equal chance of being a boy or a girl. It's not based on feelings." Theresa laughed.

"I don't care if it's a boy or a girl. I just want the baby and Ruby to be healthy," Martha said quietly.

"Yes, Martha, that's all that really matters," Alice agreed.

After more talking, chatter, and even dessert, supper was winding down. Cletus prepared to go into his formal parlor, and Edna Petunia was nodding off at the table. Alice thought she might actually have a chance to sneak up to her room without a talk from her parents.

It was Hattie and Martha's turn to do the dishes, and Alice slipped out of her chair quietly. She started for the hallway.

"Alice, why don't you join me and your mother in the formal parlor," Cletus called after her.

Alice sighed. They were going to talk with her after all. Alice followed Cletus into the formal parlor.

"Edna Petunia!" Cletus shouted. A few moments later, Edna Petunia clambered into the parlor, and both husband and wife took seats.

Alice sat down across from them and sighed. "Please just say what you're thinking."

Cletus stroked his chin. "What we're thinking is that we don't want you to get hurt. Neither does Lewis."

"And we're thinking, what were you thinking?" Edna Petunia exclaimed. "Carrying on like that in the mercantile, where there are windows, plain as day. Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not saying Cletus and I haven't been intimate in public places before."

Alice grimaced. She did not want to hear about this. Though her adoptive parents had been elderly when they'd met and married, their passion for each other was as intense and strong as two teenagers. They had no qualms about displaying their affection for each other in front of the entire family.

"What I'm saying is, you have to be careful about who you choose to play hide-the-pickle with. And you absolutely have to wait until you're married!" Edna Petunia's voice turned from playful to stern. "We don't even know who this man is. Lewis says he's not even sure if he can trust him."

"But Mark is a good man! I know him! I—" Alice stopped herself before she could say anything she would regret. She had been about to say that she loved him—and that thought terrified her.

Cletus put his arm around Edna Petunia. "Both of us just want what's best for you, Alice. Do you understand that?"

Alice nodded. "I understand. I won't be alone with Mark Brooks at the mercantile again."

"That's right, you won't," Edna Petunia agreed. "Because starting tomorrow, I'll be at the mercantile to make sure you aren't alone with him."

Alice stared at her parents in shock. "I don't think that will be necessary."

"Apparently, it is." Edna Petunia reached into her blouse. "Peppermint stick?"

Alice shook her head, almost too upset for words. "Am I excused?"

Cletus looked surprised. "Do you have anything else to say?"

"No," Alice replied.

“Then you’re excused.” Cletus sighed. Parenting was a much harder job than he’d ever imagined. Law school, which he’d also undertaken later in life, had been a breeze compared to being a father to fifteen orphaned girls.

Alice walked out of the formal parlor and went upstairs.

Cletus looked at Edna Petunia. “Is it just me, or is she a lot more upset than usual?”

Edna Petunia clutched Cletus’s arms. “All my bastards are growing up so quickly! Soon they’ll all be gone, and I won’t have anything to do with myself!” Bastard was her preferred term for the girls. Even though it wasn’t necessarily true, she meant it as a term of endearment.

Cletus turned and faced his wife. “Edna Petunia, it’s true that our girls are maturing. But I know you. Our lives together are always going to be full and exciting.”

Edna Petunia smiled. “You’re right, Cletus. I don’t know what I was thinking.” She took another sip from her flask and sat back against the sofa, content.



MARK’S PALMS were sweaty as he approached the mercantile. He hadn’t seen Alice since the previous day and was worried that she would be upset with him. He also didn’t know if Lewis would still want to do business with him.

“How can I help you, young man?” A loud elderly woman’s voice startled Mark as he walked into the mercantile. He saw Alice and Lewis helping the other customers. He hadn’t realized there was another employee.

“My name is Mark Brooks. I’m here to meet with Lewis,” he said quietly, not wanting to make a fuss.

The woman’s cheery demeanor changed abruptly. “I know all about you, Mr. Brooks! Follow me.”

Alice watched helplessly from the side of the store as Edna Petunia led Mark to the back entrance. Lewis was too engrossed in assisting an elderly man to notice. Alice unwound a piece of fabric a customer was interested in and held it out for the woman to see. She tried to see what was going on in the back, but they were out of sight and out of earshot.

Mark Brooks was baffled by the angry woman in front of him. He trailed her out the back entrance to the grassy field behind the mercantile.

“My name is Edna Petunia, Mr. Brooks. Do you know who I am?” Edna Petunia asked sternly.

Mark had to admit that he did not.

Edna Petunia put her hands on her hips. "A few years ago, my husband and I adopted fifteen orphan girls. Does that ring a bell?"

Mark lowered his head and stared at his feet. He nodded. This woman had to be Alice's adoptive mother, and she did not seem happy with him.

"Her father and I raised all of our girls to be good girls. Do you understand?" Edna Petunia questioned, practically shouting.

Mark nodded again. "Yes, ma'am."

"I don't know what your intentions are, son—" Edna Petunia began.

"My intentions are to marry your daughter," Mark said quietly.

"To carry my daughter? You're going to pick her up and carry her somewhere? I don't think so!" Edna Petunia shrieked.

"Marry her!" Mark cried, frustrated.

"Marry her!" Edna Petunia repeated. She was at full volume now.

Just then, Lewis came outside. "What on Earth is all this shouting about? You're scaring away the customers!"

Edna Petunia and Mark both pointed at each other.

"He started it!" Edna Petunia said.

At the same time, Mark cried, "She started it!"

Lewis threw his hands up in the air. "You both need to calm down, or I'll ask you both to leave."

Edna Petunia frowned. "I'm just here to protect Alice." She stomped back into the mercantile.

Lewis looked expectantly at Mark.

Mark sighed. "I'm sorry. That woman brought me out here and began yelling at me."

Lewis grinned despite himself. "Well, now you've met Edna Petunia."

Chapter 7

The days passed quickly with Edna Petunia and Alice both helping at the mercantile. With the extra help, Edna Petunia could watch the store while Alice ran upstairs and helped Ruby and the children, or vice versa.

Mark came each day to meet briefly with Lewis and make that day's delivery. He always tried to talk to Alice, but Edna Petunia intervened and prevented them from having a conversation.

Alice found that although she was annoyed by Edna Petunia getting between her and Mark, she enjoyed having the older woman around. Work was more fun with a little help. She wished she could talk to Mark, but she also knew that Edna Petunia was just trying to protect her.

Mark was frustrated that he couldn't talk to Alice. As the weeks passed, he watched Alice from afar, confident that she was the woman he wanted to be with. As time went on, he knew she was his soulmate. He wanted to marry her, but her parents made sure he wasn't able to talk to her.

Soon, Mark had finished correcting all the errors from the original shipment. He changed his schedule so that he only stopped at the Nowhere mercantile once per week. Mark's business in other towns grew, and he had to determine where he wanted to settle. His uncle's house was nice, but it was far away from where his clients' establishments were.

"I think I'd like to build a house somewhere else and make a fresh start," Mark explained to Lewis one day over lunch. Mark had purchased sandwiches for the pair to eat as they discussed business. Lewis had grown to trust Mark and continued to order several products from Mark's business.

"I believe there's a parcel of land for sale in Nowhere, actually," Lewis said. "I don't know if you'd want to settle around here—"

Suddenly, they heard a large crash from the front of the mercantile. Both men raced to the front of the room. Edna Petunia was on the ground, covered in a dozen hats.

"What in—" Lewis started.

“How did this—” Mark began.

Edna Petunia just howled. Alice couldn’t tell if it was in pain or laughter.

Alice buried her face in her hands. Edna Petunia had been trying on hats for fun and had accidentally stumbled into the rack. Alice was embarrassed that Mark was there to witness this. Edna Petunia’s arms and legs wiggled every which way. Finally, Alice bent down, grabbed the older woman’s hand, and helped pull her back to her feet. Hats scattered everywhere. Mark hurried to pick them all up.

Lewis seemed annoyed. “How did this happen, Edna Petunia?”

Edna Petunia eyed the hat rack suspiciously. “Your hat rack is no good. Who made this shoddy product, anyway?”

Mark’s face turned beet red. “That’s one of our racks, ma’am.”

Edna Petunia shook her head sadly. “You should tell your manufacturers that they need to make sturdier furniture! Someone could have been hurt!”

Mark was too flabbergasted to respond, but Lewis wasn’t. Lewis picked up the hat rack and returned it to its upright position. He held it with his hands and tapped on it. “Seems pretty solid to me. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with this hat rack.”

Edna Petunia sighed loudly. “You wouldn’t understand, Lewis. Come, Alice. Let’s get back to our chores.” Edna Petunia glared at Mark as she stormed off.

Mark looked at Lewis dejectedly. “She still hates me.”

Lewis frowned. “I would say you’re overreacting, but it does seem like she still has a problem with you. I told her that your word was good.”

“She still does everything in her power to come between me and Alice. I haven’t said more than a few words to her in months,” Mark lamented.

Lewis smiled. “I have an idea. I can tell you all the things that Edna Petunia likes. Maybe if you bring them with you next week, she’ll start to like you a little more.”

Mark nodded. “If you’re willing to do that for me, that would be great. It’s worth a try.”

The following week, Mark brought a box of chocolates, a tin of peppermint sticks, and a bouquet of flowers for Edna Petunia. He worried he was overdoing it a little, but he knew from Lewis that Edna Petunia enjoyed all of those things.

Alice looked up in surprise as Mark entered the mercantile with flowers in his arms. For a brief moment, her heart leapt as she imagined they were for her. Then a dark thought crossed her mind. What if Mark was seeing another woman—or worse, what if he was engaged? She didn’t know what she would do if she had to watch him

be with another woman. Alice looked down at the floor, suddenly feeling gloomy.

Just then, Edna Petunia's unmistakable voice rang throughout the store. "I can't be bribed, son! Don't even try!"

Alice looked up, startled. Edna Petunia had flung the bouquet of flowers back at Mark. She was sniffing something in a tin and holding a box of chocolates at arm's length. Alice hoped Edna Petunia didn't want the chocolates. She would gladly take them.

"I'm not trying to bribe you," Mark explained patiently. "I just wanted to bring you a little cheer since you and Alice work so hard to keep everything running smoothly here at the mercantile."

Edna Petunia sniffed the tin. "They look nice, and they smell nice, but something is a little bit strange about these." She pulled a peppermint stick out, examining it. "Oh, wait. I know!" To Mark's utter shock and horror, Edna Petunia pulled a handful of peppermint sticks out of the tin and shoved them down her blouse.

Alice had to look away to keep from laughing. She felt bad for Mark. He knew that Edna Petunia was a little eccentric, but he had no idea just how wacky she could be.

Edna Petunia couldn't interpret Mark's expression. She pulled a peppermint stick from her bosom. "Would you like one?"

"No, thank you," Mark managed to say.

Lewis came over from the front of the store, where he had been assisting a customer. "Those are lovely flowers. Did you bring them, Mark?"

"Yes, I did," Mark replied.

"I don't want them," Edna Petunia said. "I'll keep the peppermint sticks. But this doesn't mean I trust you. Do you understand?"

Mark sighed. He had thought his and Lewis's plan was foolproof, but it clearly hadn't had its intended effect on Edna Petunia. "I understand." He took the flowers and chocolates and walked back to his wagon.

Alice watched Mark leave sadly. She wished her parents weren't being so harsh on him. She still didn't understand what they had against him.

Edna Petunia whipped out a peppermint stick and began munching on it. "Mm."

Lewis and Alice exchanged a look. Edna Petunia would probably never change. She was set in her ways, and everyone was mostly used to them by now. But did that mean that Mark Brooks would never have a chance to properly ask for Alice's hand?

Lewis felt sorry for the man, and he felt guilty that he had probably caused much of Edna Petunia's and Cletus's suspicion about Mark. At the time, he had been trying to protect Alice, but now he

could see that Mark truly cared for his sister-in-law. Over the past few months, Lewis had grown to truly enjoy Mark's company. He hoped that Mark would decide to stay in Nowhere. Lewis knew it was a long shot, but he would be honored to have Mark as a brother-in-law one day. He just didn't know how they were going to get around the problem of Edna Petunia.

One day after work, Alice was upstairs helping Ruby and the children, and Edna Petunia was tidying the shelves.

"Edna Petunia, may I ask you a question?" Lewis helped her by picking up cans from the shelves as she dusted underneath them.

"Anything, son." Edna Petunia ran her duster along the length of the shelf.

"What is it you have against Mark Brooks?" Lewis asked. "He's more than proven his honesty, and his products speak for themselves. We haven't had another problem since the first disaster of a shipment."

Edna Petunia thought long and hard about her words. "I suppose I have a bad feeling about him."

"What do you mean by that?" Now Lewis was genuinely confused.

"He's a traveling salesman. He makes his living by meeting people, befriending them, and making them trust him. I don't think that necessarily makes him a bad person, but it makes me suspicious of him and his character. Sure, he says he likes our Alice, but how do we know that he doesn't have a girl in the next town over as well?" Edna Petunia stopped dusting and put her hands on her hips.

Lewis had never thought about it that way. He knew Mark wouldn't do something like that, but he also could understand Edna Petunia's point of view. "Is there anything that Mark could do to prove to you he wasn't like that?"

Edna Petunia thought about this for a moment. "I suppose if he moved to Nowhere and stopped traveling so much, then Cletus and I would feel more comfortable about him courting our Alice. If Alice wanted to, that is."

Lewis was encouraged. Although it would take some convincing to get Mark off the road, maybe that would be possible one day. Lewis still felt like he owed Mark some help since Lewis had caused the problems with Edna Petunia and Cletus in the first place. He couldn't wait until the next time Mark came to the mercantile so he could tell him about Edna Petunia's explanation.

Upstairs, Ruby noticed that Alice seemed a bit down. "What's going on, Alice? You're not your usual smiling self."

"Oh, it's nothing important." Alice waved a hand.

"Alice, you can tell me if something is bothering you. I know I can't do much right now, but I can listen!" Ruby pointed out.

Alice hesitated. She didn't want to burden Ruby with her problems with her parents.

"Honestly, I've been so bored with so little to do. You'd be doing me a favor," Ruby encouraged.

"Edna Petunia and Cletus hate the only man I've ever had feelings for!" Alice finally cried. She burst into tears.

"I'm sorry I've upset you," Ruby said. She gave Alice a hug.

"It's not your fault. I've been holding it all inside for weeks," Alice explained.

"Why don't you start from the beginning?" Ruby suggested.

"Mark Brooks is one of the merchants that makes deliveries to Lewis." Alice took a deep breath. "We've gotten to know each other, and once he even asked me to supper."

Ruby opened her mouth in surprise. She always thought of Alice as one of the youngest sisters, and it was strange to picture her being romantic with a man. But all of the girls were growing up, and this was a natural step for a young woman.

"I said no because I didn't know him well enough. There was some trouble with the first shipment from Mark's warehouse, and Lewis wasn't sure if he could trust him or not," Alice continued.

"Yes, I remember that. Lewis was upset," Ruby recalled.

"Word got around town that Mark might not be an honest businessman, and people are unfairly judging him. Including Edna Petunia and Cletus." Alice sighed. "But he's a good man, Ruby. He's kind, hard-working, and smart. He and I were talking one day, and I helped him figure something out with his books. Then, suddenly . . . we were kissing." Alice blushed. She didn't want to tell her sister this part, but she had to so Ruby would understand the situation.

"Oh, my goodness!" Ruby couldn't hide her surprise. Alice was usually so responsible and serious. She couldn't imagine Alice letting go and kissing a man.

"Lewis saw us, and he told Edna Petunia and Cletus about what happened. Do you know how Edna Petunia has been helping out at the mercantile and around your home for the past few weeks?" Alice asked.

"Yes." Ruby wasn't sure where her sister was leading with this.

"The real reason is so she can keep an eye on Mark. And on me. I haven't been able to truly speak to him in weeks. Edna Petunia and Cletus have forbidden me from going out to supper with him. Now, we'll never be together!" Alice finished sadly.

Ruby had never seen Alice express her feelings about a man before. She was excited for Alice, but she also understood Alice's fears and concerns. If Edna Petunia and Cletus didn't approve of a suitor, his chances were very low in courting one of their daughters. "Why do

you think they don't want you to be alone with Mark?"

Alice shook her head. "They still don't trust him. But Lewis does!"

"Hm. Let me think." Ruby tried to figure out a way she could help her sister, but nothing immediately came to mind. "I think if Mark can manage to convince Edna Petunia he's trustworthy, she'd be able to win Cletus over."

"That's easier said than done!" Alice exclaimed. "Trust me, Mark is trying his hardest. He brings her little gifts, but she says she doesn't want them. Well, except for the peppermint sticks."

"Well, when Edna Petunia gets it in her head that someone is mistreating one of her bastards, it's hard to change her mind. Maybe she just needs a little time to see that he's only treating you well," Ruby said.

"I hope you're right," Alice replied. "Because seeing him without being able to really talk to him is breaking my heart."

Ruby felt a wave of sadness for her younger sister. She knew Alice as a reserved and cautious woman. Ruby knew what it was like to wrestle with feelings for a man. "I think I understand a little bit of what you are going through."

Ruby had gone through a difficult time of her own when her former fiancé had broken things off before their wedding. She had met Lewis, who fell in love with her and could offer her a wonderful family life. But soon after, David had changed his mind and wanted her back. Ruby had known her duty was to stay with her husband and sons, but she'd hated crushing David's feelings. Ruby tried to soothe her sister. "I'm praying for you, Alice. I hope it will all work out for you. I'm sure it will."

Chapter 8

One month later, Mark peered at his reflection in the window of the mercantile. He straightened his tie. After several weeks of trying to soften Edna Petunia to his position, today was the day. If his final attempt to win her over didn't work, he was going to move on to another town.

Over the past few weeks, Mark had tried to get closer with Alice, but each time, Edna Petunia interfered or figured out a way to prevent them from speaking to each other. Mark had grown more and more frustrated. At the same time, his business was growing. It had taken a while, but he finally felt that he was in control of his business. He knew what he was doing and how to direct the team of men who worked for him.

Mark was mostly content, but something was missing. He had no one to share his life with. He longed to come home from a long day's work and be greeted by a woman who loved him and wanted to talk about all the things that had happened since the last time they'd seen each other. A hearty, delicious meal would be cooking on the stove when he got home, and they'd eat together as they relaxed. Mark sighed as he looked at his reflection. He knew what he wanted, but it seemed like his situation was hopeless.

Mark took a deep breath and opened the door to the mercantile. Alice was helping a few clients, and he could see Lewis in the back doing paperwork. Edna Petunia stood at the counter, a stern look on her face.

Mark pulled out a small tin of peppermint sticks from his briefcase and approached Edna Petunia. He forced a big smile. "Good morning, Edna Petunia. I brought you something."

Edna Petunia accepted the peppermint sticks. "Thank you, Mark. You've already brought me several of these tins," Edna Petunia grumbled.

Mark tried to put a positive spin on Edna Petunia's comment. "I've heard that they're your favorite, and you can never have enough of your favorite thing."

"Spoken like a man who has never known what it's like to

struggle.” Edna Petunia sounded disapproving.

Mark fought the urge to sigh or throw down his briefcase and storm out of the room. It seemed like nothing he did would ever be good enough for Edna Petunia! He was so frustrated he wanted to leave, but instead, he went to his usual table and waited patiently for Lewis to meet with him.

After a few minutes, Lewis walked over to Mark and greeted him. Lewis sat down at the table, and the men began discussing business. Mark showed Lewis a piece of paper from his briefcase detailing all of the transactions since Mark had taken over his uncle’s company. “I appreciate all of your business, Lewis. You’ve been true to your word and gave me a second chance. Without you, there’s no way I would have been successful in taking over my uncle’s business.”

Lewis frowned. “You’ve proven yourself to be trustworthy and reliable. I don’t feel I’ve done much. But you sound as if you’re saying goodbye. What aren’t you telling me?”

Mark glanced over at Alice, who was now waving goodbye to the customers she’d helped as they left the store with their purchases. He looked back at Lewis. “None of my efforts have worked with Edna Petunia. I’m afraid that my desire to pursue Alice is just that—a desire. I don’t want to waste more time in my life chasing after a dream that could never happen.” As Mark said the words, he got sadder and sadder thinking about the fact that Alice wouldn’t be in his life.

Lewis looked down at his hands. “I can understand that, Mark. You’re a good and honest man, and my in-laws aren’t budging. I’ve even put in a good word about you with them, but it’s changed nothing.”

“I’ve decided it’s time to move on. After today, I’m going to look for a permanent place to live in one of the other towns I have business in. I’ll still stop in from time to time, but not once per week like I have been,” Mark admitted. He would miss seeing Lewis regularly. Over the past several months, Lewis had gone from a client to a friend.

“I’m sorry to hear that, but I respect your decision,” Lewis told him.

Mark felt relieved that Lewis understood. He had been concerned that Lewis might want to take his business elsewhere once he stopped getting such attentive service, but Lewis was a businessman, too. He realized the situation Mark was in and that Mark was doing what he needed to do. “Thank you, Lewis. Thank you for everything.”

Lewis stood up. “Sounds like we’re done here, for now. Please know that you’re welcome here in my mercantile any time.”

Mark stood up, too, and shook Lewis’s hand. “That means a lot.”

Alice saw Mark and Lewis shaking hands and felt a wave of anxiety

wash over her. Something about the gesture felt final, and that scared her.

Mark walked up to Alice, hoping he'd get a chance to speak with her. As soon as he drew near, Edna Petunia raced toward them and stepped directly in between Mark and Alice.

Alice stared down at the floor.

"Hi, Alice," Mark said softly. He tried to look into her eyes, but Edna Petunia was in the way.

"Hello, Mark," Alice replied.

"How have you been?" Mark asked nervously. This was his last chance. He hoped Edna Petunia would step aside and let them have a normal conversation. Then he could ask Alice out to supper again, and hopefully, she'd agree.

Edna Petunia spoke up before Alice could respond. "She's been fine, Mark. You know our family is busy with another little grandbaby on the way! If only it was a grandbastard . . ."

Mark looked befuddled, and Alice almost laughed but bit her lip instead. "What exactly does that mean?" Mark asked.

"You don't want to know." Alice smiled.

"Practically everyone that I love is one of my bastards!" Edna Petunia explained proudly.

Mark knew that Alice and her sisters loved Edna Petunia, but she could be so strange sometimes! He knew he could put up with anything, though, if it meant he could be with Alice. "I see," Mark said even though he didn't understand at all. "Edna Petunia, I was wondering if I could have a word with Alice privately."

Edna Petunia frowned. This was exactly the sort of thing she was there to prevent. "Anything you have to say to my daughter, you can say in front of me."

Alice's eyes filled with tears. They had been doing that a lot recently. Edna Petunia's attention was fixed on Mark.

Mark sighed. "Alice, I have business in other towns I need to attend to. I'm going to look for a place to live where I can settle down. One day, I hope to start a family. I had hoped Nowhere would be the place that I did that. But now, it seems like that's not a good idea. I told Lewis that means I'm not going to be able to stop here each week."

Alice nodded. "I'm sorry to hear that. We'll miss seeing you around here." Inside, Alice felt like she was going to be ill. The thought of never seeing Mark again made her want to run out of the room screaming. She fought to keep her composure in front of Mark, Edna Petunia, and Lewis.

Just then, a couple walked into the mercantile. "Alice, why don't you go and help them?" Edna Petunia suggested.

Alice wiped a tear from her eye carefully, so no one would notice she was crying. "Yes, Edna Petunia." Alice hurried toward the customers so she could assist them.

Edna Petunia turned to face Mark. "Son, please understand something. I did not have daughters until I was already at an advanced age. That means there is *nothing* I wouldn't do to protect them. Do you understand?"

Again, Mark didn't completely understand, but he found himself wanting to get out of the mercantile as quickly as possible. There was no use in staying here. No matter what he did, Edna Petunia and Cletus would never accept him. The future he imagined with Alice would never come true. His uncle had always told him to be realistic and not get stuck in pointless dreams that could never be. He realized that he had been wasting his time and energy trying to get through to Alice's family. Mark nodded sadly, turned, and walked toward the exit.

Alice was over at one of the shelves, helping the customers pick out a set of tea cups. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Mark waving goodbye to her as he prepared to exit the mercantile. Alice considered running over to him, but she knew Edna Petunia would throw a fit if she did. She also didn't want to be rude to the customers, who were friendly and asking for her advice. All she could do was wave her hand slowly. She was still shocked by what Mark had told her.

Even though Edna Petunia interrupted every time she and Mark tried to talk, she still enjoyed seeing him when he came in. It made her feel safe, knowing that he was around. Now, she would probably never see him again. He'd probably meet a pretty girl from the town he settled in, marry her, and immediately begin having beautiful children. And Alice would stay in Nowhere and grow old all alone. Alice wasn't interested in any of the other men in Nowhere. They didn't have a good head on their shoulders like Mark did.

Alice tried to focus on what the customers were saying.

"I like the pattern on this one. Do you have any more like it?" one of the women asked, holding up a tea cup with a pretty blue pattern.

Alice looked at it closely. "Let me check. We received a shipment earlier today, and we might have a few more." She went to the back of the mercantile and wiped a few more tears from her face. She couldn't believe how emotional she was being. Alice liked things that made sense. This situation didn't make any sense at all.

Alice found two boxes that hadn't been unpacked and carefully opened them. She found two more teacups in the pattern the customer liked and dusted them off. She brought them back out to the woman.

"Oh, thank you, Alice!" The woman admired the teacups. "I'll take

them all!”

Alice helped her go to the counter and recorded her purchases in the ledger. The woman thanked her again. She and her friend exited the mercantile, and Alice leaned against the counter, feeling exhausted. It wasn't time to go home for the day, but she longed to curl up in bed and take a nap.

Edna Petunia walked over and noticed Alice's long face. “Oh, sweet pea. I know why you're so upset.”

“You do?” Alice was unsure.

“You thought that man was attractive. Well, I'll admit, he's quite a looker. He'll produce fine bastards one day with someone,” Edna Petunia explained.

“I don't know if you're using that term—” Alice began.

“But the point is, looks aren't everything. You need someone with a good sense of responsibility and strong integrity. A man like Cletus,” Edna Petunia said dreamily.

“I understand what you're saying, Edna Petunia. But I don't feel you and Cletus even gave Mark a chance!” Alice couldn't keep the disappointment out of her voice.

“You're upset now, but you'll feel better in time. Trust me, dear, I've been through my share of heartbreak in my day.” Edna Petunia was lost in her thoughts.

Alice knew that Edna Petunia had lost her first love many years ago, long before she had met Cletus. She was engaged to be married to the man, but he died suddenly and unexpectedly when they were both young. She knew that she would never understand how painful that experience had been for Edna Petunia. But she couldn't help but think that her situation was different. She didn't think it was worth arguing, though. It was pointless. Edna Petunia would never understand.

Alice sighed and went to the back to find a broom and dust pan. She still had a long day ahead of her, so she may as well stay busy.

Chapter 9

A little after lunch time, a young man rushed into the mercantile.

“Fire!”

Alice felt faint. “What’s happened?”

The man bent over and rested his hands on his legs, panting for breath. “We need help! People are hurt. We need water!”

Lewis stood up and strode to the front of the store. “Where at, son?”

“At the old boarding house behind the bank,” the young man said as he caught his breath.

“Let’s close shop early so we can all help,” Lewis said firmly. “Edna Petunia, we’ll go now. Alice, you gather some water, lock up, and meet us there.”

Lewis and Edna Petunia rushed out the door, and the young man followed them. Alice felt shaky but did what Lewis said. She went to the back of the mercantile and found a large bucket she usually used for cleaning. She went to the sink and filled the bucket with water. She hoped everyone was all right.

Once the bucket was full, she went out the front door to the mercantile and set down the bucket while she locked the door. She saw that Lewis had already changed the sign to say “Closed.” She picked the bucket up again and walked as quickly as she could toward the direction of the boarding house.

Already, she could see smoke billowing toward the sky behind the bank. She saw a few men in wagons racing toward the fire as well. One of them stopped in front of the mercantile.

“Would you like a ride, Miss?” an older man asked.

Alice nodded, and the man helped her into the wagon. They continued toward the old boarding house. The man stopped the wagon as they approached a large crowd of people. Alice got out and carried the bucket of water. It was heavy, and her arms were getting tired, but she carried it to a man who seemed to be directing many others. He took the bucket from Alice and gave it to another man, who ran it to several men near the front of the old boarding house.

There were men and women coughing into handkerchiefs and

gasping for air. A few women Alice recognized from church were comforting them. Alice couldn't see any fire, which was a relief, but the air was thick and heavy with smoke.

Alice spotted Edna Petunia and walked over to her. "What's going on? Are people hurt?"

"Fortunately, everyone who was inside the boarding house when the fire began managed to escape. The men have managed to put most of the fire out, but they need more water to make sure it doesn't start again," Edna Petunia told Alice.

"Thank goodness." Alice was so relieved that no one had been seriously injured in the fire.

Edna Petunia pointed to the front lines. "Lewis is up there with the rest of them. That boy doesn't know when to stop helping others."

Alice smiled. Lewis was a man, not a boy, but she didn't bother to correct Edna Petunia. A woman who had been helping walked over to them. "We have a few people who need some drinking water. Can you help?"

Edna Petunia thought for a moment. "Cletus's office is not far. We'll go find him and bring back some drinking water."

Alice looked around. "Are you sure he's not here? It seems like half the town is here."

Edna Petunia shrugged. "Let's start walking there and find out! These people need water. Now!"



UPSTAIRS AT THE MERCANTILE, Ruby tried to stand so she could put Jasper down for his nap. As she lifted herself off the sofa, a sharp pain shot through her torso. She clutched her stomach and cried out.

The twins and James, Lewis's oldest boy, ran into the room.

"What's wrong, Mama?" One of the twins began to cry.

Ruby tried to remain calm. "I'm fine, sweetheart. But I need a doctor. Can you run downstairs and get your father? He'll send for Dr. Harvey." Ruby knew exactly what was happening. She knew all the signs. The time was now. The baby was coming.

James nodded. "I'll go."

Robert frowned. "I'll stay with you, Mama. You shouldn't be alone."

"Thank you." Ruby was relieved that Lewis worked downstairs at the mercantile and not far away from their home. She hoped Dr. Harvey would be able to come quickly. She was in a great deal of pain.

James ran down the stairs to the mercantile, taking them two at a time. To his surprise, he couldn't find his father, Edna Petunia, or

Alice anywhere. There were no customers inside the store either, which he knew was unusual for the middle of the day.

James walked to the front door and saw that the door was locked. He slipped out the back exit to the mercantile, re-locking the door the way his father had taught him. He smelled smoke in the air and raced to the front of the building. He saw a large crowd of people in the distance and smoke pouring from a building.

James raced toward the smoke.

A few blocks away, Mark Brooks was preparing to leave Nowhere. On his way out of town, he had seen the smoke and stopped to help. He had aided the men of Nowhere in pouring water on the fire for what felt like hours until the worst of it was out. Now there were many people crowded around the building, ready to help out, so Mark felt it was time to go. He had even spotted Edna Petunia and Alice in the crowd, but he ducked so they wouldn't see him. He'd had enough humiliation in front of Alice, and he didn't want to endure any more.

Mark thought about all the tasks that awaited him once he finally returned to his uncle's former home. The fact that he still thought about it as his uncle's and not his own was a sign that he needed a fresh start in another town. He had to admit that he was disappointed Nowhere would not be the town where he was going to start his new life. He had been impressed by how quickly the citizens had come together to fight the fire.

As the horses carried the wagon through town, Mark spotted a familiar-seeming young boy running through the streets, shouting for help. Mark slowed the horses to pull up next to the boy. "What's wrong, son?"

James was grateful the older man had stopped for him. "I need to get my father. My mother is having a new baby, and she needs a doctor!"

Mark realized why the boy seemed familiar to him. "Are you one of Lewis Darcy's boys?"

"Yes, sir, I am!" James exclaimed. "Do you know where my father is?"

"There was a fire, and your father is helping to put it out," Mark explained. "It might take a while to work our way through the crowd, though."

James thought quickly. "I was trying to find my father to send for Dr. Harvey, the town doctor. She'll know exactly what to do. Have you seen her or Dr. Bennett?"

Mark shook his head. "I do business with your father, but I don't know everyone in this town. I do remember that someone said they were going to send for the town doctors. If you can tell me where they live, I'll take you there," Mark told the boy. He could see the fear on

the boy's face, and he knew that Lewis would want him to do anything necessary to help his wife.

"Yes, sir, I think I can direct you there. Dr. Bennett is one of my uncles. He's married to one of my aunts," James told him.

Mark shook his head in wonder. Everyone in town seemed to be related to Alice in some fashion. But it was the least he could do to help her family. He'd do this one good deed, and then he would go on his way and try to forget all about Alice and her overprotective parents. "Which way first?"

James pointed west in the direction of Dr. Harvey's house, and Mark steered the horses into a turn. Mark sighed wearily. It seemed like every time he tried to leave Nowhere, something kept pulling him back in.

A few minutes into the journey, Mark spotted another wagon in the distance. He waved to flag the driver, a young man, down. A woman was in the wagon with him.

"That's my uncle Stephen!" James said excitedly.

When they were closer, Mark shouted to the pair. "Excuse me, we know you're probably on your way to the fire. But we need one of you to help Ruby Darcy. It sounds like she's gone into labor!"

The young doctor quietly conferred with the woman, who looked only slightly older than he was. In a matter of moments, the woman was stepping out of the wagon and rushing toward Mark's wagon, carrying a doctor's bag.

She climbed up into Mark's wagon and smiled cheerily at Mark. "I'm Dr. Iris Harvey. Pleased to make your acquaintance. My nephew will continue on to help at the fire, and you and James can take me to Ruby."

Mark nodded, and he swiftly turned the wagon around and set off for the mercantile. They raced toward town. Mark hoped Ruby wasn't in too much pain.

In the Darcy residence, Ruby felt dizzy. She didn't understand what was taking so long. Why hadn't James come back upstairs? Where were Lewis, Edna Petunia, and Alice? She had thought that at least one of them would come upstairs to help her and the children while the other went to find Dr. Harvey.

Ruby wasn't afraid of childbirth. She had been through it enough times that she knew what to expect and knew that her body could handle it. But she was afraid of facing it alone, with no one in the house but her young children.

The twins were huddled in the corner, quietly talking to themselves. Jasper had come in and brought Ruby a blanket, which she'd rolled up and placed beneath her head and shoulders for comfort. Her labor pains were getting closer and closer together now,

and she knew the baby was coming quickly.

Outside, Mark pulled the horses to a halt in front of the mercantile. James and Dr. Harvey jumped out, and James led her around the side of the mercantile to the back entrance. As Mark parked the wagon, James unlocked the door, and Dr. Harvey raced into the mercantile and up the stairs. She had been to the Darcy residence before and knew exactly where to go.

As she neared the top of the stairs, Dr. Harvey called out to Ruby. "It's Dr. Harvey. I'm coming in!" She gently pushed open the door and rushed through the rooms until she saw Ruby, stretched out on the sofa, clutching her stomach in pain.

A cool wave of relief washed over Ruby. She immediately felt safe and peaceful once she knew Dr. Harvey was there. The woman had been taking care of Ruby and her sisters ever since they had arrived in Nowhere. Edna Petunia and Dr. Harvey had worked together for years and had actually moved to Nowhere together from Seattle. Dr. Harvey was practically family.

Dr. Harvey smiled at the twins and Jasper. "You all have been so wonderful, helping your mother. I'll take things over from here. James, can you help me get Ruby into the bedroom?"

James and Dr. Harvey carefully helped Ruby stand up. She was still wincing in pain but bit her lip to keep from crying out. Together, they walked with her into the bedroom, and she laid down on the bed. Dr. Harvey quietly asked James for a list of things to help with the birth. James rushed off to prepare them.

Mark stood outside the mercantile awkwardly. He hadn't even met Ruby Darcy, so he wasn't about to go inside and wait in her home while Dr. Harvey delivered her baby! He realized that Lewis still had no idea what was going on, so he climbed back into his wagon and set off for the old boarding house.

When he arrived, the fire was mercifully out, but the crowd was still there. They conversed loudly, huddled around a few people with blankets wrapped around their shoulders, sipping from small cups of water. Dr. Bennett examined them one by one, holding a stethoscope to each person's chest and waiting for him or her to inhale and exhale.

Mark parked the wagon, tied up his horses, and made his way through the group of people until he found Lewis. He put his hand on the man's shoulder. "Lewis, you need to get back to the mercantile."

Lewis's face wore a concerned expression. "What is it? Is it one of the children?"

"Ruby's gone into labor," Mark explained. "I know you came here on foot, so I'll take you back."

"She is? I didn't think the baby was due for at least a few more weeks!" Lewis said nervously.

“Dr. Harvey’s with her now,” Mark said, hoping he could reassure his friend. Mark felt uncomfortable knowing so many details about Ruby’s condition, but he also knew it was important to get Lewis back to his wife.

“Thank you, Mark. I thought you’d left town already!” Lewis exclaimed as Mark led him to his wagon.

“I was trying to . . .” Mark began but trailed off. That didn’t matter. All that mattered was getting Lewis back to help his wife and family.

Once again, Mark pulled the wagon up in front of the mercantile.

“I don’t know how I can ever thank you, Mark,” Lewis said gratefully.

Mark grinned. “Get in there! Go on, I’ll be fine!”

Lewis nodded and rushed around to the back of the mercantile, finding that the back entrance was already unlocked. He hurried up the stairs to find James playing with his younger children in the living room.

Jasper broke out into a huge smile. “Daddy!”

Outside, Mark looked back and forth between the main street of Nowhere and the mercantile. He’d had an idea, but he wasn’t sure about it at all. It was probably a terrible idea, motivated by the day’s unexpected events. He shook his head. He should just leave town, like he’d been trying to do all day.

Just as he was about to take off again, he changed his mind. He carefully stepped out of the wagon and walked toward the mercantile. He pulled two small envelopes from his pocket and slipped them under the front door of the closed mercantile. He knew it wasn’t going to make a difference in his situation, but it would make him feel better to express all the things he had been trying to say.

Satisfied, Mark went back into his wagon and set off for his uncle’s home.

Inside the mercantile, Dr. Harvey handed a crying baby boy to Ruby. “Congratulations, Ruby. He’s beautiful.”

Ruby held her new son in her arms, marveling at how tiny he was. She never got over how small or sweet newborn infants were. She felt so grateful that she and Lewis had been blessed with healthy, happy children. It was just what she had always wanted.

Downstairs, Edna Petunia and Alice returned to the mercantile. The crowd had gone home, with Dr. Bennett still monitoring a few of the people who had been in the boarding house when the fire had started. Several of Alice’s sisters had volunteered to take folks into their own homes while the boarding house was being rebuilt.

Alice saw that the front door was still locked. “Where’s Lewis? I thought he came back here.”

"I didn't see him when we were leaving. I also thought he came back here," Edna Petunia agreed.

Alice unlocked the door and frowned. There were two envelopes lying on the floor inside the mercantile. She bent down and picked them up, then walked inside. She turned back to Edna Petunia. "They're for us." Alice took the envelope addressed to her and handed the other one, addressed to Edna Petunia, to her adoptive mother.

Edna Petunia was stumped, too. "What's all this about?" She opened her letter quickly and pulled a note out.

Dear Edna Petunia and Cletus,

I understand that you want me to have nothing to do with your daughter. I respect you both greatly and will comply with your wishes. I want you to know that I have always been in love with Alice from the first moment I met her. My intentions with her have always been pure and true. I only want Alice to be happy. I'm leaving Nowhere, and you won't hear from me again.

Sincerely,

Mark Brooks

"What does yours say?" Alice was curious.

Edna Petunia shook her head. She thought she should be relieved that Mark was moving on, but instead of feeling happy, she only felt sorry for her daughter and Mark. Despite everything else, she couldn't deny that they genuinely had feelings for one another.

Alice opened her letter.

Dear Alice,

I love you. I will probably always love you. I understand that your family doesn't think I'm good enough for you, and I have to accept that. It's too painful to watch you from a distance and not be able to spend time with you. I know that you are going to make another man very happy one day.

With all my love,

Mark Brooks

Tears filled Alice's eyes for the second time that day. She held the letter to her heart. She couldn't believe that Mark had sent her such a thoughtful, beautiful letter. It was almost too much to bear. She didn't want to make another man happy. She wanted to make *Mark* happy.

Just then, Alice's thoughts were interrupted by wailing coming from upstairs. Alice and Edna Petunia looked at each other in shock. It sounded like a new baby!

Alice looked at the clock. It was after five o'clock, so the mercantile was officially closed. She and Edna Petunia raced up the stairs and were greeted by Jasper and the twins' beaming faces. In the kitchen, James was preparing some food for the family.

"We have a new baby brother!" one of the twins squealed.

"I'm going to teach him everything I know!" Jasper said proudly.

"Ma said she knew the baby was coming, but no one was here, so Mr. Brooks and I went to get Dr. Harvey!" James told them excitedly, coming into the living room.

Alice's mouth dropped open. "Mark Brooks is still here?"

James frowned. "No, I think he left a little while ago. I'm not sure."

Edna Petunia smiled from ear to ear. "Where's my new grandb—"

"Baby!" Alice shouted out. "Where's Edna Petunia's new grandbaby?"

James pointed into the bedroom.

Alice gently opened the door to the bedroom. "Can we come in?"

"Yes!" Ruby called.

Alice was pleased to see that color had returned to her sister's cheeks. She was the picture of health and happiness, cradling a newborn baby in her arms. You would never know to look at her that only hours before, she had seemed pale and sickly.

Edna Petunia smiled. "What a beautiful little grandbastard."

Alice and Ruby made eye contact and shook their heads slightly. Some things would never change.

Edna Petunia took a deep breath. "I need to go now. I'll be back later this evening with Cletus. I'm sure the whole family will want to meet the new baby." With that, she rushed out of the room, leaving Lewis, Alice, Ruby, and Dr. Harvey staring at each other in confusion.

"Why was she in such a hurry?" Lewis wondered.

"It's Edna Petunia," Dr. Harvey pointed out. "Who knows why she does anything?"

Chapter 10

“Faster!” Edna Petunia hollered.

“They’re going as fast as they can!” Cletus yelled back.

“Are you sure this is the right place?” Edna Petunia asked, shouting to be heard as the wind rushed against their faces.

“Yes, I’m sure! I did the calculations,” Cletus said indignantly.

After a little while, they saw exactly what they were expecting to see—one young man, hunched over in his wagon, his horses moving at a slow trot.

“Son! Please stop!” Cletus called out.

Mark Brooks was greeted by one of the strangest sights he’d ever seen. Two elderly people were rushing toward him in a wagon, waving their hands up and down. He pulled the reins and stopped his wagon, waiting for the couple to pull near.

As they came into focus, he saw that they were none other than Edna Petunia and Cletus Sanders. “What are you doing here?”

Cletus shrugged. “I figured out where you’d be, and I know a shortcut.”

“That’s not important!” Edna cried. “We have something to talk with you about.”

Mark frowned. This family had caused him so much pain. He didn’t owe them anything. But they had clearly felt it was important to come and find him, so he decided to hear them out. “I’m listening . . .”



TWO HOURS LATER, the street outside the mercantile was filled with wagons. Cletus and Edna Petunia pulled up first. He helped Edna Petunia get down and then found a place to park his wagon. Mark was only a few minutes behind them and did the same thing. Together, they walked up the stairs to the Darcy residence.

The Sanders girls and several of their husbands and children were milling about from room to room. Word traveled fast in the family, and everyone wanted to see the newborn baby.

Mark shyly followed Cletus and Edna Petunia until he saw Alice.

He walked up to her and put a hand on her shoulder as she was talking to one of her sisters. "May I have a word with you privately?"

Alice turned around and had the shock of her life. Mark Brooks was standing next to her, touching her shoulder. She felt the same fluttery feeling in her stomach as usual when he was around, and she gasped. "What are you doing here?"

"It's a long story," Mark said. "Can we go outside to talk?"

Alice nodded.

Theresa whispered to Katie, "Who is *that*? He's so handsome!"

Hattie interrupted. "That's Mark Brooks! One of Uncle Lewis's merchants who supplies the mercantile!"

Theresa and Katie turned to stare at her. "How do you know that?"

Hattie looked at them like they were crazy. "I pay attention!"

"Okay, but what is he doing talking to Alice outside?" Theresa pointed out.

Hattie, Katie, and Theresa all erupted in giggles.

Alice followed Mark down the staircase. He took her outside the mercantile, leading her by the hand. Alice couldn't believe that he was really back. She had thought she'd never see him again, and now here he was, right in front of her and even holding her hand.

"Alice, I owe you an apology," Mark began.

Alice frowned. "An apology? Why?"

"I left. I should never have left. Even though Edna Petunia and Cletus were being . . . difficult, I shouldn't have given up on my hopes for our relationship. Can you ever forgive me?" Mark searched Alice's eyes, hoping she would give him another chance.

Alice looked down. "I was very disappointed when I thought I'd never see you again."

"Oh, Alice, I was, too," Mark said earnestly. "Then, Edna Petunia and Cletus came and found me. I don't know exactly why, but Edna Petunia had a change of heart. She told me that she realized that I want the same thing as they do—for you to be happy."

Alice couldn't believe what she was hearing. "They've given their approval?"

Mark nodded. "Alice, I've loved you since the day I met you. I don't want to waste another moment. Will you marry me?"

Alice stared at Mark in shock. She couldn't believe that everything she had dreamed was actually coming true. She nodded, still in disbelief. "Yes," she replied quietly.

Mark wanted to make sure he had heard her correctly. "Yes?"

"Yes!" Alice threw her head back and let the wind blow through her long hair. "A million times yes!" For the first time in weeks, she felt peaceful and happy.

"Oh, I'm so relieved. I was worried you would tell me you never

wanted to see me again!" Mark admitted.

Alice shook her head. "I would never say that to you. Even when I thought you weren't going to be back in Nowhere, I would still want to see you."

Mark was still amazed. "I can't believe your parents changed their minds."

Alice nodded. "I can't believe it either." They heard another wail from above, and Alice smiled. "Speaking of my family, we heard that you helped James find Dr. Harvey. We can never thank you enough."

"I suppose soon enough, I'll be family, too." Mark grinned. "No need to thank me."

Alice shivered in the early evening air.

"Are you cold?" Mark asked, concerned. The air was warm and humid. He put his arm around her.

"I think I'm just exhausted," Alice admitted. "It's been quite a day."

"You're right about that," Mark said.

"I also can't believe I get to spend the rest of my life with you!" Alice exclaimed. She was still reeling from everything that had happened that day.

"I can't either," Mark agreed.

"When do you think we should marry? I hope it's soon." Alice felt embarrassed as soon as she realized what she'd implied.

"Trust me, I hope it's soon, too. There are some wifely duties that I think you'll be excellent at," Mark teased.

Alice blushed bright red and looked down. "I don't know. I'm worried that I might not know what to do. But I want that, too."

"The most important thing is that we'll be together. We'll figure things out as we go along," Mark reassured her.

Alice smiled. She felt wonderful being in Mark's arms, like she could do anything. All the fantasies she'd had about their life together came rushing back to her. "I wish we could get married tonight," Alice blurted.

Mark laughed. "Trust me, I'd want nothing more than that. But where would we find a minister at this time of night?"

Just then, they heard someone calling out from the front of the mercantile. "Hello? Can someone let me in?"

Alice and Mark walked around the building to the main street. Micah Barton, Sarah Jane's husband and the town minister, had come to see the new baby.

Alice's face lit up. "I have an idea . . ."

One hour later, Carter and Jed, two of Alice's brothers-in-law, had moved aside the shelves of the mercantile to form an aisle. Cletus walked slowly down the aisle, Alice on his arm, as Edna Petunia

watched proudly. Alice wore Ruby's veil and wedding dress. It had belonged to Cassie Hayes, the matron who had brought the orphans to Texas, and it just so happened that Ruby was holding it at the mercantile for her for safekeeping, and she was pleased to have any of the girls wear it.

The bride carried a fresh bouquet of flowers that her sister Dorothy had brought for Ruby. When Alice had explained her plan, the entire family had banded together to make all the arrangements for a wedding.

"I'm so grateful to be here today, bringing together these two people who are so in love that they couldn't wait to share their joy with all of you." Micah blessed the entire family, especially Ruby and Lewis's newborn baby and the new couple. "I look forward to welcoming Mark into the family just as all of you have already welcomed me. We'll try not to quiz you on everyone's names because there are a lot of us." Everyone laughed.

As they exchanged vows, Alice's eyes were shiny with tears. She couldn't believe her luck. Mark was so much more than a romantic interest. He was her life partner, and there were so many exciting adventures in their future together.

Mark was thrilled as he looked at his bride. She was poised, kind, and intelligent—all of the traits he valued. And she was also stunningly beautiful, which didn't hurt. He couldn't wait to start a family with Alice. Their children would be fortunate to have such a strong, smart woman as their mother.

As Micah pronounced them man and wife, Alice and Mark beamed as they stared at each other.

After the ceremony, most of Alice's sisters disappeared upstairs to the kitchen while Ruby and the new baby rested in the bedroom. A short while later, Dorothy came down the stairs with freshly baked cookies. "There's more coming!" Dorothy promised.

Edna Petunia offered everyone peppermint sticks, but no one was interested. She pulled one out of her bosom and began to eat it, smiling from ear to ear.

"Edna Petunia, I'm surprised," Opal admitted. "I thought you'd want to plan an elaborate wedding for Alice. Or at least try to stop her from getting married immediately! I thought you liked long engagements."

Edna Petunia waved her hands. "No, no! To be truthful, I'm a little tired of lace and flowers and all of that nonsense. What's most important is that my family is healthy and happy." Opal found Edna Petunia's answer to be unusually simple and logical. But then Edna Petunia walked over to Cletus and swatted him on the bottom. "Plus, the less time I spend planning weddings, the more time Cletus and I

have to play hide-the-pickle!”

Cletus and most of her daughters laughed, but Alice felt mortified. Fortunately, after his initial surprise wore off, Mark joined in on the laughter.

Edna Petunia was delighted. “You two will know what that’s like soon enough! Now, I didn’t pressure you about the wedding, but you can’t blame me for wanting more grandbastards. You two had better get started on your marital activities quickly!”

Alice felt her cheeks heating up, and Mark wrapped his arm around her. “Some things are best left private, but I think it’s safe to say we’re both eager to start a family.”

Alice smiled at her new husband. He knew the exact right thing to say to make her feel comfortable. It was amazing how quickly he was already getting along with her family. Alice gazed around the room. She could never have predicted that her wedding day would look like this—a scattered crowd of relatives in the middle of her place of employment after a day in which her youngest nephew was born and there was a fire in town. Though it wasn’t what she had expected, she was so happy that everything had worked out exactly the way it was meant to be.

Epilogue

Alice soothed her baby nephew, rocking him back and forth as she walked through Ruby's bedroom. She was glad that she and Mark had decided she would continue helping out at the mercantile. She knew she wouldn't be able to do it forever, but for now, it was nice to be around her sister and her family.

Alice hoped that she would be just as good of a mother as Ruby was. She rested a hand on her stomach. It was still flat, but she and Mark knew about the child that was already growing inside of her. Dr. Harvey had said that in a few short months, their family of two would become a family of three. Alice hadn't told the rest of the family yet because for now, she and Mark were keeping this wonderful little secret to themselves.

Alice knew her family would be very excited for them, but she also enjoyed having something that only she and her husband knew about. With so many men, women, and children in the family, it was nice to have a little privacy. She and Mark were planning to tell the family in a few weekends when the family gathered to celebrate Alice's birthday.

She couldn't wait to ask her sisters for their advice. She felt fine so far, but she knew that the months ahead would be challenging and draining. For now, while she still had a lot of energy, she was focused on making her house her own. Mark had purchased a small plot of land less than a mile from the mercantile. With the help of the other Sanders family brothers-in-law, they had built a wonderful house with several bedrooms.

When Edna Petunia had seen the house, she had clapped her hands in excitement. "You two must really be enjoying your marital activities. It looks like you're planning to fill this house with babies!"

Alice had laughed and blushed, but it was true. Alice and Mark hoped to have a house full of children. They loved each other, their family, and their community in Nowhere—they couldn't wait to share the life they'd built with their children.

"Shh," Alice whispered to her nephew. "It will all be all right."

She went out into the living room and looked out the window at

the sun shining down onto the streets of Nowhere. It was a beautiful day, and everything was right with her world.

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